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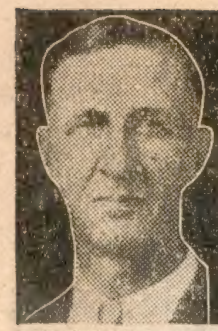

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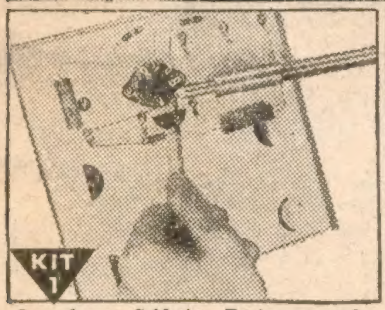

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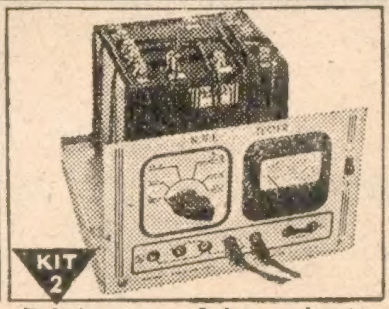

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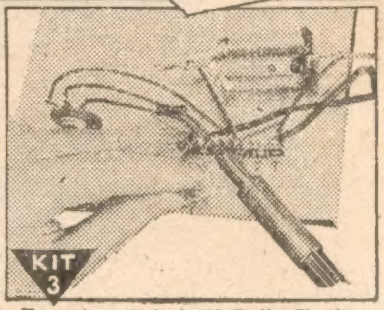

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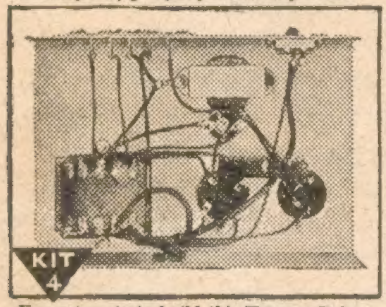

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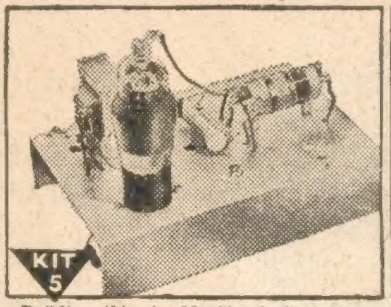

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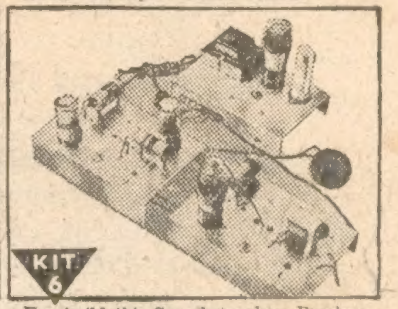

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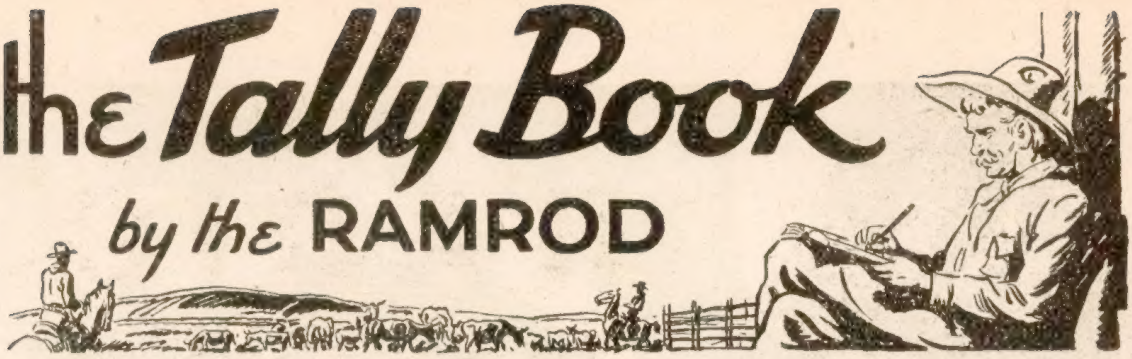


A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

IN OUR last issue we promised that we were going to get you the best western stories being written today and that we were going to pack them lavishly between the covers of this magazine for a generous quarter's worth. Well, neighbors, we're keeping that promise. For our next issue we've scheduled a book-length novel entitled WATER, GRASS AND GUNSMOKE, by L. P. Holmes, a novel that we think comes mighty near being the finest western yarn we've ever read!

It would be easy to go plumb rhapsodic about this hunk of fiction, and it is a temptation. In the first place, it's a two-fisted story; tough, crisp, hard-hitting, with a bite like a well-honed knife. At the same time, there is nothing crude about the yarn. Its characters are mature folks who are real and believable human beings. They're not just names with six-guns attached.

The Tough Hat Ranch

The Hat ranch was known to be tough. Old Hamp Rudd had built it up with gun and fist and he picked a crew to match. Old Hamp often said he wouldn't give a busted flush for a crew that didn't have plenty of bark on it.

But old Hamp was dead now and the reins were in ramrod Logan Ware's hands. And for awhile everybody sat back and waited to see if Logan Ware could keep the Hat empire from breaking up, or if it took Hamp Rudd's iron fist to hold it together.

Trouble came from two directions at once. Old Hamp Rudd's daughter, Loren, came back, filled with conscience-stricken notions about her dad's piratical tactics in building up his holdings, and burning with a desire to give something away.

"Parts of Hat range were pirated from others," she told Logan Ware. "I intend to return those portions to their rightful owners. I want no stolen acres in my inheritance!"

It was useless to explain to her that no part of Hat was stolen; that the three men she was preparing to give land were scheming crooks who had sold her a phony bill of goods. She was deaf to Logan Ware's arguments.

A Joker Up His Sleeve

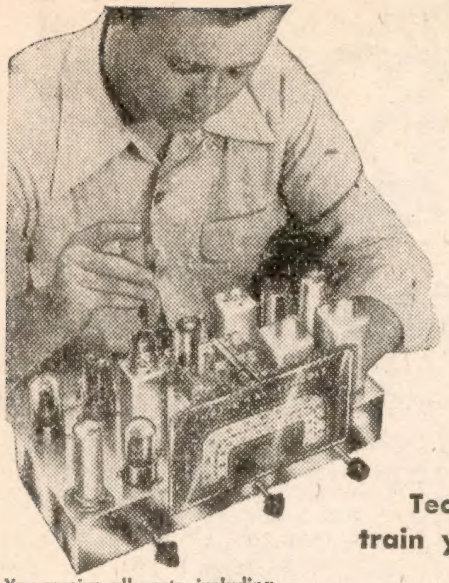
But he had the joker in his own sleeve. Hamp Rudd's will had named Logan Ware as foreman with full authority for one year. During that time Loren Rudd could not fire him and during that time she must live at the ranch or lose her inheritance.

"I am your prisoner," she said, making no secret of the fact that her only feeling for Logan Ware was distrust and dislike.

But this was not the only probe stabbing at Hat to see if Old Hamp's death had made it vulnerable. Two of the cowboys, Spade Orcutt and Morry Seever, thought this a good time for a cleanup.

Ware was on his way back from Harte City when he ran into a half-breed named Ute Rhyde and a stranger, driving twenty head of Hat cows. Rhyde went for his gun pronto and gave Ware a crease along the side of

(Continued on page 189)



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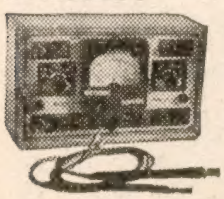

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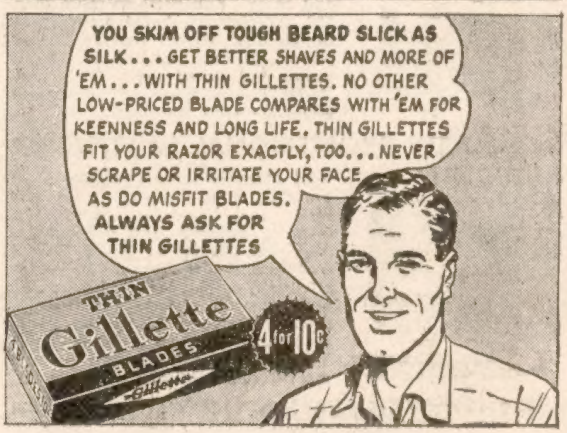
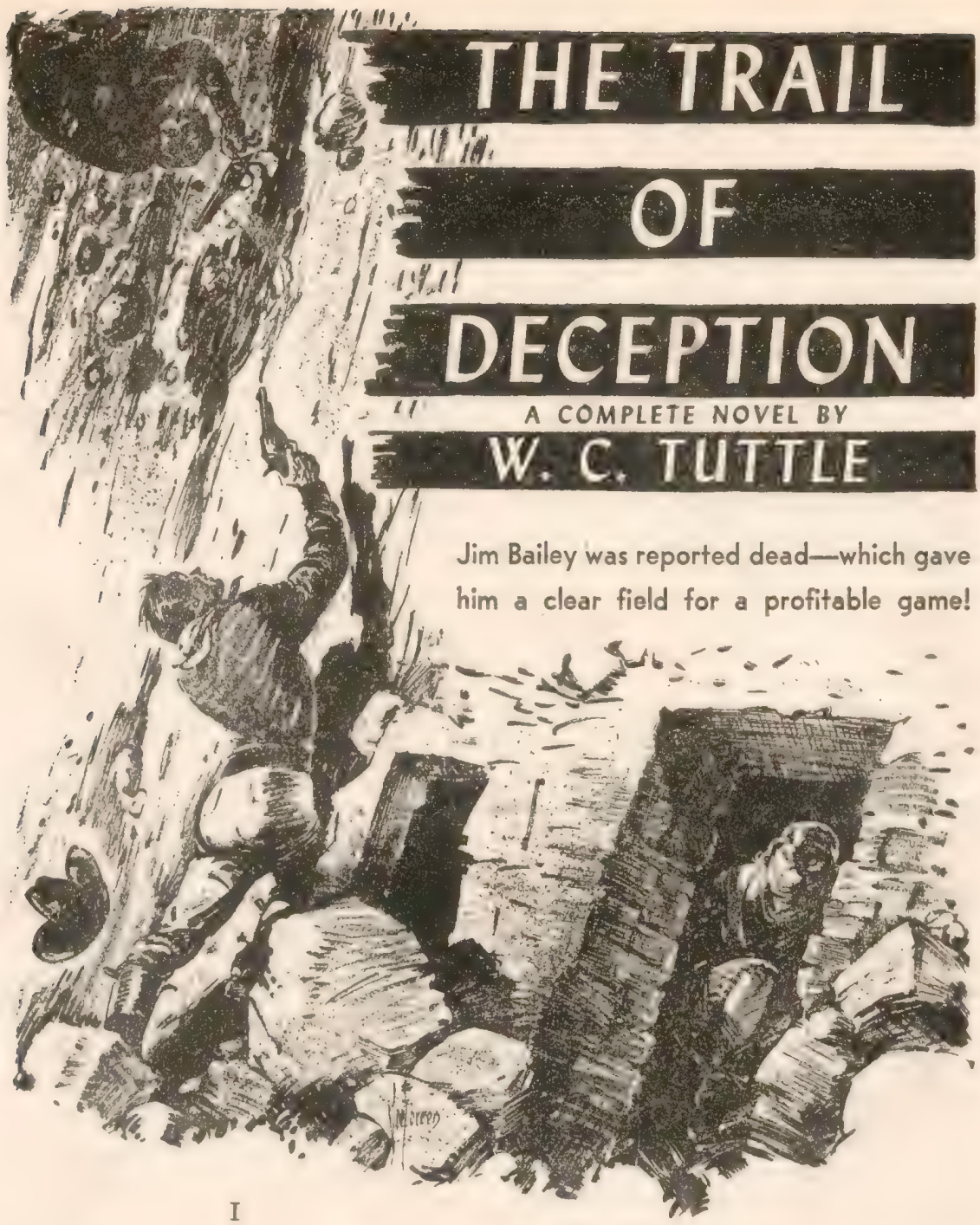
LADY MEETS LION AND THEN . . .

SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN . . .

DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC
DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM
HOTEL
LATER

I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT. THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND . . .
WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?
I'D LOVE IT
HE'S SO HANDSOME!


YOU SKIM OFF TOUGH BEARD SLICK AS SILK . . . GET BETTER SHAVES AND MORE OF 'EM . . . WITH THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE COMPARES WITH 'EM FOR KEENNESS AND LONG LIFE. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR RAZOR EXACTLY, TOO . . . NEVER SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE AS DO MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢



THE TRAIL OF DECEPTION

A COMPLETE NOVEL BY

W. C. TUTTLE

Jim Bailey was reported dead—which gave him a clear field for a profitable game!

I

JIM BAILEY was thoroughly disgusted and discouraged, as he sat down on a park bench. It was nearly dark, and the lights were blinking around him. Jim was only twenty-five years of age, fairly-well dressed, fairly good-looking; an average young man, trying to buck the world.

For two days he had tried to find a job, but with no success. He had two dollars in his pocket, owed ten dollars room rent, due right now—and an assurance from the landlady that unless he produced the back rent tonight—

Jim was a bookkeeper. That is, he tried to keep books, if he could have found some books to keep.

He tried to tell himself that he would

be all right, if it was not for Cliff De Haven, that doggone chiseler! Cliff was an actor—a hoofer. That is, he was when there was a job for him. When there wasn't he shared Jim's room, but not in any financial sense of the word. He also ate at Jim's expense. Cliff was a hard man to insult. At least, Jim Bailey found him so. Maybe Jim didn't use the right words.

Cliff always had a big deal coming up. Last night he had told Jim that he was all set for the biggest deal of his life and that Jim would profit thereby. Cliff chummed with a down-at-the heel private detective named Bob Hawley. Jim hated Hawley. Often he ate with Cliff, and Jim paid the check. Yes, if he could get rid of Cliff De Haven—but what was the use?

It was about eight o'clock when Jim got off the bench and walked to his room. He simply could not pay the bill, so there was no use trying to fool the landlady any longer.

The landlady was not in sight as Jim came in. He looked into the series of pigeon-holes at the desk, took out a letter addressed to Cliff De Haven and a folded sheet of paper, on which was printed in the landlady's familiar hand:

Dear Mr. Bailey; Unless you can pay me ten dollars tonight, I must ask you to vacate early in the morning.

Jim Bailey crumpled the paper and tossed it into the wastebasket. No use keeping it. He went up to his room, where he tossed his hat aside and sat down on the edge of the bed. The built-in wardrobe door was open, facing him as he sat, and he got up quickly and investigated. His best suit was missing, his one best shirt, his best pair of shoes. On the table was a penciled note, which said:

Sorry, old man, but I had to put on a little dog. Will see you tomorrow. Also borrowed your watch, as I needed something to make a little flash. Thanks. Cliff.

Jim threw the letter aside in disgust. It was like Cliff to do a thing like that. Suddenly it occurred to him that Cliff had neglected to empty the pockets, in which were several letters, cards and things like that. He had probably dressed and got out in a hurry, knowing that Jim would soon be back.

Jim expected a visit from the landlady, but she did not put in an appearance, so he went to bed, leaving the door unlocked. Cliff would probably show up before daylight, full of apologies and other things.

BUT Cliff did not show up. Jim got up about eight o'clock. He had an old suit-case, but little to put in it until Cliff came back with that suit and clothes. He went out to get some breakfast and ran into a new chambermaid at the bottom of the steps. He inquired about the landlady, and the woman said she was sick.

"Will she be here today?" he asked.

"She will not," replied the woman. "She has some sort of infiction."

Jim went out to the street, grinning. He said half-aloud, "I'll bet she bit herself."

He ate breakfast in a cheap restaurant and bought a paper, mostly for the want-ads. He glanced at the front page and his own name seemed to jump up at him. A smash-up between a truck and a street car—gasoline explosion—several people killed and injured! Only two bodies identified. Robert Hawley, a private detective. The other was, according to the police, Jim Bailey, address unknown. Partly-burned papers in his pocket and a wrist watch positively identified him. Hawley was identified by unburned articles in his possession.

Jim Bailey leaned against a post and drew a deep breath. His suit! His watch! He looked vacantly at the traffic along the street. Jim Bailey was dead—it said so in the paper. Walking in sort of a daze he went back to his room. Address unknown. He sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to realize what had happened. Jim Bailey was dead. That was a good joke.

Jim Bailey

He started to light a cigaret, then remembered the letter for Cliff De Haven. It was there on the table. There was no letterhead on the envelope, and the postmark was blurred. He opened the letter and looked it over. Cliff would never read it. It said:

You will find transportation waiting for you at the S. P. ticket office. Come to Pinnacle City and contact me at once. Office on the main street. Bob Hawley says you can do the job. Remember, your name is Jim Meade. Don't talk with anyone, until we can get together on this deal, and don't mention anything that Bob has told you. Wear no fancy clothes—you're supposed to be in meager circumstances.

Ed McLean.

Jim Bailey read it twice and then sat there, an unlighted cigaret between his lips. This must have been the deal that Cliff had mentioned. He studied the postmark again and now he could see that it was Pinnacle City, Arizona. What sort of a deal was this, he wondered? Cliff was supposed to go to Pinnacle City, take the name of Meade—and what else?

Pinnacle City sounded interesting, like a small town. Jim Bailey had always lived in a big city. A sudden thought caused him to squint at the faded wall-paper of his room. Just suppose this Ed McLean had never—of course he had never seen Cliff De Haven. Bob Hawley had told McLean about Cliff. Why not take a chance? No job, no home, no ties of any kind. Jim Bailey grinned slowly.

"Wear no fancy clothes," he quoted aloud. "You're supposed to be in meager circumstances. Brother, you meant me!"

He took his almost-empty suit-case and left the house. There was no one in the lobby. He walked to the ticket office, where he asked about the transportation. After being shunted from desk to desk, he was sent into an office, where the man said:

"Have you anything for identification?"

Jim Bailey shook his head. "Not a thing. Oh, yes—this letter."

It was the one sent to Cliff De Haven. The man looked at it.

"You look honest, young man," he said smiling. "Here is your ticket, and here is the ten dollars expense money."

Jim Bailey walked out of the office and headed for the depot.

"Good-by, Jim Bailey," he said to himself. "I feel like a new man. Maybe I'll just get kicked in the pants, maybe they'll dump me into a nice Arizona jail.

That is in the hands of the gods. There is one angle, though, in which I can excel—and that is in forgetting that my name ever was Cliff De Haven. If I live and prosper, I'll send ten dollars to that landlady."

The town of Northport is twenty-five miles north of Pinnacle City. Passengers for Pinnacle City get off the train at Northport, and take the stage. Northport itself is no metropolis, with its one street and few false-fronted buildings. Jim Bailey looked it over and decided it would be a good place to get out of at once. However, the stage would not leave for an hour, so he sat down in the little stage-depot and tried to enjoy a smoke.

The nearer he got to Pinnacle City the less he thought of this personal masquerade he was going to attend.

NORTHPORT was depressing. At least it was until a young lady came from the depot, carrying a valise, which she placed on a seat. She was little over five feet tall, with dark, wavy hair, a beautiful olive complexion, and wonderful eyes. Jim Bailey decided that there wasn't anything wrong with those lips either. Jim Bailey admired beauty, but was woefully girl-shy. He had felt that a girl was a luxury far beyond his pocket-book.

An old timer came into the depot, grizzled, bow-legged, clad in overalls, flannel shirt and high-heeled boots. He stared at the girl for a moment and blurted:

"Mary Deal—or I'm a sizzlin' sidewinder!"

"You're not, Uncle Len," laughed the girl. "How are you?"

"I'm finer'n frawg-hair, Mary. Golly, I'm shore glad to see yuh. "It's been—uh-h-h-h—Mary, I plumb forgot."

"About Uncle Clint?" asked the girl. The man nodded.

"Why didn't somebody send me a wire?" she asked. "Even a letter might have given me time to get here. I never knew it had happened for over two weeks after he was buried."

The stage driver nodded sadly. "Yeah, I know," he said. "Ed McLean was to have let yuh know, Mary. He knowed you was at college. He said he just forgot."

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped," she said. "But I did want to be here, you see. After all he did for me—"

"Yeah, I know. It was too bad, Mary. Is that yore valise? I'll put it on the stage."

The driver looked at Jim Bailey.

"Are you my other passenger?" he asked.

"I believe I am, sir," replied Jim.

"Good! My name's Carson. What's yours?"

"My name is Jim Meade."

"Fine. Mary Deal, meet Jim Meade."

They both smiled. Len Carson said, "I like to make my passengers used to each other. It's a long ways to Pinnacle City."

"Can't I ride on the seat with you, Uncle Len?" asked Mary.

"I'd shore love to have yuh," replied the driver, "but I can't. Company passed a rule agin it, Mary. Four, five weeks ago I had a whisky drummer on the seat with me. Hit a chuck-hole and lost m' drummer. Hung him up by the seat of the pants on a manzanita snag, ten feet down on the side of Coyote Canyon. If he hadn't been wearin' awful tough britches, I'd have lost him. He sued the stage company for ten thousand dollars, but they settled for a hundred and a new pair of pants. Sorry, but I cain't take chances, Mary. Women's clothes wouldn't hold up nothin', snagged on a manzanita."

Mary laughed and got into the old stage. Jim followed her in, and the stage headed for Pinnacle City. Len Carson was a wild driver, but he had never wrecked a stage. It was the first time that Jim had ever ridden over a

"Mary Deal, meet Jim Meade"
(Chap. I)

road like that, and it rather frightened him, but Mary only laughed.

"Why are you going to Pinnacle City?" she asked.

"I don't know," replied Jim. "My plans are rather vague."

"I haven't been there for over eight months," she said. "I've been away to school."

"Is your home in Pinnacle City?" he asked.

"It was," she replied. "I don't know what will happen now."

Jim looked at her curiously, and she explained.

"I have no father or mother. Clint Haverty adopted me several years ago. He was wonderful to me. He died a few weeks ago, but no one notified me in time to attend his funeral. I came as soon as I heard about him."

"That wasn't a fair deal," said Jim.

"No, it wasn't."

"Was he a relative?"

Mary shook her head. "No, we were not related in any way. Uncle Clint knew my mother, and when she died I went to live at the Lazy H. But he's dead now and I don't know what will happen."

"Has he any relatives?"

"He has two cousins in Pinnacle City, Ace and Dick Haverty. They own the

Box Four H outfit. Uncle Clint never liked them."

"This Box Four H and the Lazy H, and all that is Greek to me," confessed Jim. "I have never been out of a city in my life before. I suppose they are places where cattle are raised."

"That's right, Mr. Meade. You'll soon learn. Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"No, I never have. Is it difficult?"

"I don't know," said the girl smiling. "I've worked with horses ever since I can remember. You will learn—the hard way."

"Everything I have ever learned was the hard way," Jim admitted.

II

IN SPITE of the dust and the rough road, the ride to Pinnacle City seemed short to Jim Bailey. Pinnacle City was booming with some new mining strikes. Jim left his valise in the stage depot and located Ed McLean's office.

The lawyer was short, fat and nearly bald. Seated behind his desk, he looked at Jim Bailey thoughtfully. This young man didn't exactly look like ready money.

"Well, young man, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"I am Jim Meade," replied Bailey soberly.

McLean twitched visibly and his pale-blue eyes blinked.

"Jim Meade?" he asked. "You—uh—ah, yes, Jim Meade. Well, I—"

"I am answering your letter," explained Jim.

"Oh!" the lawyer's relief was explosive. "For a moment, I had an idea—sit down! I want to look at you. Hm-m-m-m. You don't look very prosperous, but that is good."

McLean leaned back in his chair, an expression of satisfaction on his face. Apparently Jim Bailey met with his approval.

"You'll do," he half-whispered. "Have you met anybody—talked with anybody?"

"I met a girl on the stage. Mary Deal."

"Did she come in this morning?" asked McLean quickly. "I was expecting her, but I didn't know when she was coming. Did she talk with you?"

"Yes, some. I told her my name was Meade."

"Hm-m-m! Still, that name wouldn't mean anything to her."

"You were expecting her?"

"Yes—I wrote to her. But forget girls. This deal is a big one, and we can't afford to miss out on it, my friend. How are you fixed for funds?"

"I am not."

"I see. Well, go easy. Here is fifty dollars. Your room will not cost over a dollar a day. Don't drink, don't gamble. Let me handle everything. And above all, don't try to explain anything."

"Isn't that a rather ridiculous order?" asked Jim. "After all, what could I explain?"

"True. But if anybody asks you questions about where you come from and what you are doing here—evade them."

"When do I learn what this deal is all about?" asked Jim.

"Didn't Hawley tell you anything about it?"

Jim shook his head, wondering if Hawley should have told him.

"Does Hawley get a cut out of the deal?" he asked.

"I'll take care of Hawley. As soon as we can get together, I'll explain everything. Too many people come in here. I'll get in touch with you tonight, if I can, and we'll go into the deal."

Jim got his suit-case at the stage-depot and secured a room at the hotel. He signed the register with the name of Jim Meade, and gave his address as San Francisco. The lobby was full of roughly-dressed men, some of them wearing chaps and spurs—and guns. Jim Bailey didn't like that idea. He

stopped at the top of the stairs and saw several of them examine the register.

"I feel like a criminal," he told himself, "and I haven't done a thing—yet."

The food was good in the little restaurant, but Jim spent most of his time watching the people. In all his life he had never seen as many hard-looking men, but they seemed good-natured, having a good time. There were cowboys, cattlemen, miners, prospectors, and a sprinkling of dapper-looking gamblers. Just after dark he met Ed McLean on the street.

"I've been looking for you, Jim," the lawyer said. "We can't talk tonight, but I typed out some stuff for you to memorize. Put this in your pocket and study it in your room. See you tomorrow."

Jim went back to his room and studied the paper. It read:

> You are Jim Meade, born twenty-seven years ago in Denver, Colo. Your mother was Gale Haverty, your father was Henry Meade. He was a small merchant, and died fifteen years ago. Your mother died nine years ago. You heard vaguely of relatives in the Pinnacle country, and came here, hoping to get work.

Jim studied the few lines carefully. It still didn't make sense. He repeated it over to himself several times, tore the note into small pieces and sifted them out the window, where they blew away in the breeze.

"Haverty?" queried Jim to himself. "That's the name of the man who died and left the big ranch—the one Mary—" He stopped and thought things over. "But where does Jim Meade enter into the deal? Maybe Jim Bailey is getting in over his head. Well, I've got to know a lot more about it than this, before I get excited."

MARY DEAL sat on the big porch of the Lazy H and talked things over with Tellurium Woods, the old cook, who had been there for years. Tellurium was as wide as he was high, and he was only five feet, three inches tall. Except for a tuft above each ear, Tellurium was as bald as a billiard-ball.

"You'll jist have to blame Ed McLean for not bein' told about Clint dyin'," sighed Tellurium. "I reckon he was too busy to do much thinkin'. Ed McLean and the Cattlemen's Bank are the executioners of the will, which ain't been read yet. I heard it was to be read tomorrow. You'll get the Lazy H—that's a cinch. Clint wouldn't give Ace and Dick Haverty the sleeves out of his vest."

Mary had no comments. A rider came up to the ranch-house and drew up at the porch. The rider was tall and thin, with a long, rather humorous-looking face. He took off his sombrero and grinned at them.

"I'm lookin' for the ramrod of this spread," he said quietly.

"If I ain't mistaken, pardner," replied Tellurium, "you'll find Tex Parker down around the corrals."

"Much obliged, mister—and ma'am," he said soberly, and rode down across the yard.

"There goes Arizona," said Mary.

"Huh? I didn't git it."

Mary laughed. "When I was at school, I thought of Arizona a lot, Tellurium—and Arizona was always a tall cow-poke on a long-legged horse, squinting into the sun."

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean. That hombre looks like real folks, and he packs his gun low and handy. I like his grin."

The tall cowboy found Tex Parker at the stable. Tex was a raw-boned cowboy, hard-faced, with little sense of humor. He sized up the stranger questioningly.

"Yo're Tex Parker? Good! I'm knowed as Skeeter. Smith is the last designation. Glad to meet yuh."

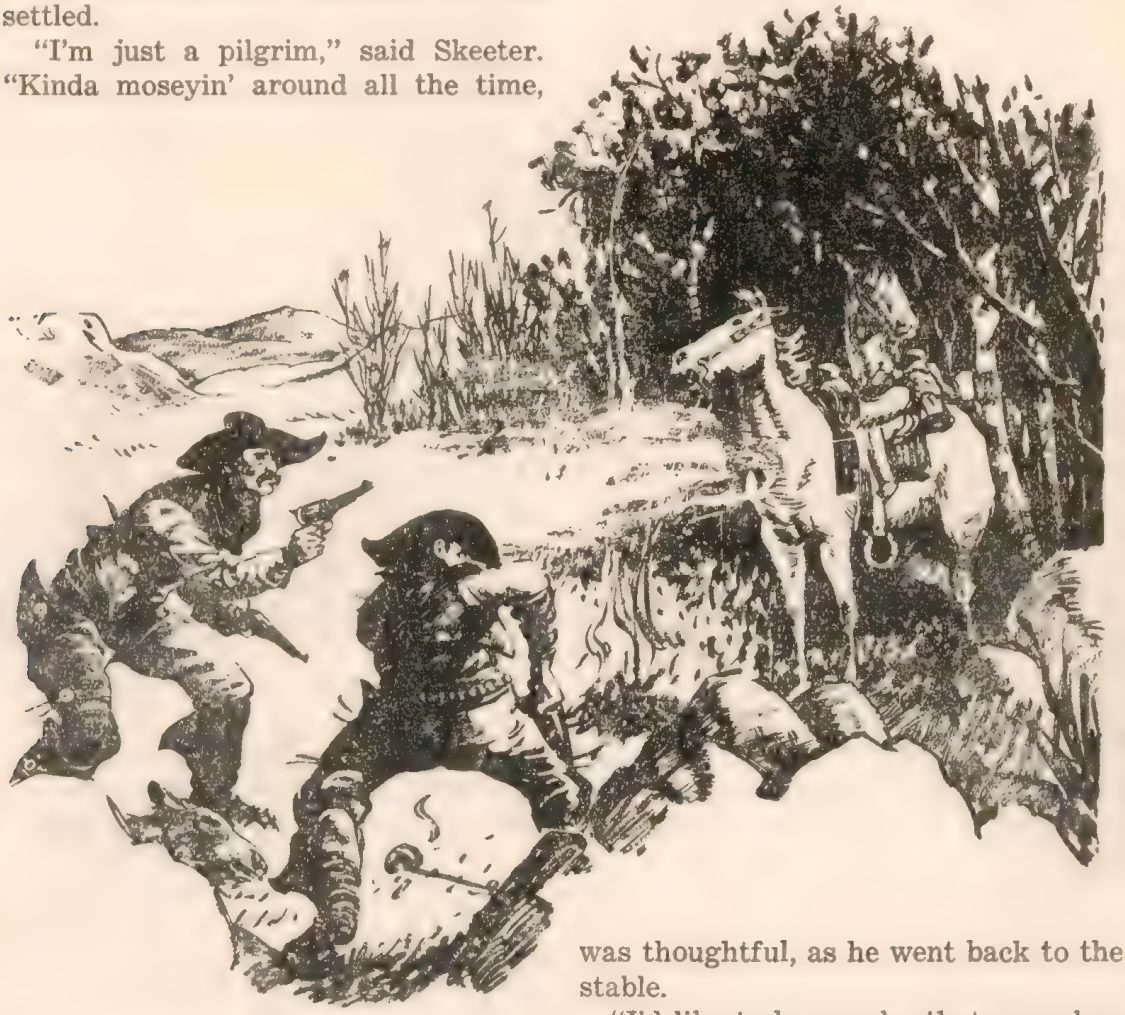
Skeeter Smith dismounted and leaned against the fence. "What can I do for yuh, Smith?" asked the foreman.

"A job," replied Skeeter. "I was up

in Pinnacle City, kinda askin' around, and somebody told me that the bank was runnin' the Lazy H; so I went to see the head-man of the bank, and he said you was startin' a roundup next week."

"I see," said Parker. He didn't like the idea of the bank taking things over like that. After all, nothing had been settled.

"I'm just a pilgrim," said Skeeter. "Kinda moseyin' around all the time, lookin' at things and places. Right nice lookin' spread you've got here. I've been rated as a top-hand with cows."



Tex Parker smiled. "You pack yore gun awful low for jist a pilgrim," he remarked.

"Long arms," said Skeeter soberly. "Kinda lazy, too. Hate to have to crook m' elbow too much. How about a job for a while?"

The foreman nodded. "All right, Smith. I'll show yuh a bunk, and you can dump yore war-bag. Start workin' in the mornin'."

"Right nice and pleasant of yuh, Parker. Thanks."

Skeeter Smith left his war-bag in the bunk-house, got on his horse and headed back for Pinnacle City. Tex Parker was thoughtful, as he went back to the stable.

"I'd like to know who that rannahan is," he remarked to himself. "Pilgrim! Oh, well, all I want is a good cow-hand —and he talks like a good one."

On the porch Tellurium and Mary were talking about Len Carson, the stage-driver.

"Ol' Len's a character," laughed the cook. "I think he was exaggeratin' about the drummer. I don't believe he ever fell into Coyote Canyon. I heard the drummer made a derogatory

Another shot blasted and Jim pitched into space (Chap. VI)

re-mark about some woman in Pinnacle City, and Len knocked him off the seat. Didja hear about Len gettin' held up? No?

"Yeah, that happened about a month ago. Two fellers stuck up the stage. Got away with some gold from the Santa Isabella mine, and some registered mail, I heard. Had masks on. Len wasn't able to say who they looked like."

"Len never told me about it," said Mary. "In fact, we didn't have much chance to talk."

"You mentioned a passenger named Meade," said Tellurium. "Yuh know, I've been thinkin' about that name, and I kinda remembered Clint speakin' of somebody named Meade. It seems to me that it was some relate of his'n, but I can't be sure."

"I suppose there are a lot of people by that name," said Mary.

"Yeah, I reckon there must be. Well, I've got to start cookin'."

Tellurium bow-legged his way into the house, headed for the kitchen. He whistled off-key, but with enthusiasm.

III

JIM BAILEY'S first night as Jim Meade was fraught with bad dreams and bed-bugs. Stampeding cattle and

bucking horses trampled him into the dust while Mary Deal hung suspended over the side of a cliff, her skirt twisted into a manzanita snag. Jim wanted to be a hero, and save her, but his former landlady showed up and chased him through the brush. However, the bugs were very real.

The bank had notified Ace and Dick Haverty to come in at ten o'clock that morning to listen to the reading of Clint Haverty's will, and they were in, dressed in their Sunday clothes, looking very uncomfortable. They were a hulking pair of unshaved, unwashed cattlemen, expecting nothing from the estate of their uncle.

Ed McLean, the attorney, was there. No one had invited Mary Deal. Thomas Estabrook, the white-haired banker, was there, grim-visaged, as became a banker. Ed McLean, after a short preamble extolling the virtues of Clinton Haverty, opened the sealed envelope. The will was short and to the point, witnessed by the postmaster and the proprietor of the hotel.

It left the Lazy H ranch—buildings, furniture, all live-stock and money in the bank—to Jim Meade, son of his sister, Gale, and Henry Meade, last heard of in Denver, Colorado. It gave Ace and Dick Haverty each a silver dollar, but did not even mention Mary Deal. Mace Adams, the grizzled sheriff of Pinnacle City, was in at the reading.

"I have never heard of Jim Meade," Estabrook said. "Didn't Clint say anything to you about him, Ed?"

"I asked him about Meade, when he signed the will," replied the lawyer. "He said, 'It is up to you to find him.' I have no idea where to look, Mr. Estabrook. Of course, we can—"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Meade? Why, there's a stranger at the hotel, and I'm sure he signed that name."

"That," said McLean, "would be a coincidence."

"That would be my opinion, too," said the banker meaningly.

The sheriff found Jim Bailey at the hotel, sprawled in a chair, reading an old paper.

"Your name is Meade—Jim Meade?"

"Why yes," nodded Jim. He saw the insigne of office on the sheriff's vest, and swallowed painfully.

"Come up to the bank with me," said the sheriff. "If your name is Meade, we need you."

Jim Bailey got slowly to his feet. "The—the bank hasn't been robbed, has it?" he asked haltingly.

"Not yet," smiled the sheriff. "This is about a will."

Jim Bailey went with him. The presence of Ed McLean was reassuring, at least. The two Havertys looked at him indifferently.

"He says his name is Jim Meade," announced the sheriff.

"I see," mused the banker. "Your name is Jim Meade?"

JIM BAILEY nodded. "What is all this about?" he asked.

"Do you claim that you are the nephew of Clinton Haverty?" asked McLean pompously.

"Clinton Haverty?" parroted Jim. "Why, I—I don't know."

"You don't know?" snorted the banker. "What are you doing in Pinnacle City, young man?"

"I happen to be minding my own business," retorted Jim hotly. He didn't like the attitude of Thomas Estabrook, and showed it.

"Let me handle this," suggested the lawyer. "We understand that you are Jim Meade. The question is—are you related to the late Clinton Haverty?"

"I told you that I don't know. I have heard that I had some relatives in this country, but I don't know their names. I came here, looking for work."

"What sort of work?" asked the banker.

"I am a bookkeeper."

"Where and when were you born?" asked McLean.

"In Denver," replied Jim. "I am twenty-seven."

"That checks," said McLean. "What was your mother's maiden name—her first name?"

"Gale," replied Jim quietly. The effect was good. "My mother died about nine years ago."

IT SUDDENLY occurred to Jim that it was ridiculous for him not to know that his mother's name had been Haverty, but no one asked him.

"What was your father's given name?" the banker asked.

"Henry," replied Jim Bailey. "He died fifteen years ago."

The banker sighed and looked at McLean, who was lighting his pipe.

"What is this all about—or am I not supposed to know?" Jim demanded.

"Young man," replied the banker, "Clinton Haverty died a few weeks ago and the bulk of his holdings have been left to a Jim Meade, who was born in Denver, twenty-seven years ago. It is very coincidental that you should come here at this time, but your answers seem definite. Of course, this will cannot be probated for a while, at least until the judge recovers from an illness. The court will, of course, demand all possible proof before accepting you as the legal heir to the Lazy H. The reading of this will was held up by me until such a time as Mary Deal could be present. I supposed, of course, that she would be mentioned. However, Mr. McLean neglected to tell me that she was not included."

"I don't know what to say," said Jim Bailey. "I had no idea of anything like this. It rather—er—floors me, gentlemen."

"All we git is a silver dollar apiece, eh?" grunted Ace Haverty. "That wasn't worth ridin' in for!"

"In these clothes, too!" added Dick Haverty.

"You didn't expect he'd leave you anything, did you?" asked the banker curiously.

"Not 'less he had some loose debts hangin' around," replied Ace. Dick roared with laughter, slapping his leg.

"That's a good'n!" he gasped. "Ace, yo're a dinger!"

"I believe that is all, gentlemen," said the lawyer. "Nothing more can be done until the will is offered for probate."

"How about giving Meade a job in the bank?" asked McLean. It would do away with the problem of expense money.

The banker shook his head.

"There is no opening," he replied, "and if there was, I'd have to know a lot about a man—a lot more than we know about Mr. Meade."

Jim Bailey went back to the hotel, feeling that the banker was suspicious. Jim knew now what McLean's game was and wondered just what he would have to do for McLean, in case he got the Lazy H. But Jim was not without certain fears. If they ever did discover his real identity, or prove that he was not Jim Meade—Jim Bailey didn't like to think about it. He was anxious to have a long talk with Ed McLean, but realized McLean had to be careful.

It didn't take long for the news of the will to become known. The general opinion was that Clint Haverty had done entirely wrong in not including Mary Deal in the will. As far as the two Haverty boys were concerned, they got too much. Tellurium Woods, the Lazy H cook, and Archie Haas, horse wrangler, came to Pinnacle City after dark. These two had stayed away from liquor up to the limit of their ability. They met with Cactus Spears, the deputy sheriff, who was a fraternal soul, dogged by thirst. Cactus was small, wiry, with a long nose and inquiring eyebrows. Archibald Haas was a long-armed, big-

footed person, whose I.Q. was just below zero, but companionable. These three entered the Antelope Saloon and spaced themselves closely against the bar.

They drank soberly and solemnly, bowing to each other before each drink. Sam Ballew, the bartender, looked upon them with evident apprehension. They had started this way before and ended up in a blaze of glory.

"I unnerstand the Lazy H is roundin' up t'morrow," Cactus said.

"Thaz true," replied Tellurium. "We've gotta count all the li'l dogies. The bank wants it."

"Wha' they goin' do with 'em?" asked Archibald, "Put 'em in the shafe?"

It wasn't funny. Even the bartender didn't laugh.

"I shuppose you have heard 'bout Mary not bein' mentioned in Clint's will," Cactus said.

"Heaven's m' home!" gasped Tellurium. "You mean— Cactus, old friend, yo're lyin' to me. You mean—yuh do?"

PATIENTLY Cactus told them of the will and its contents. Archibald cried on the bar, but Tellurium, built of more solid fiber, cursed the name of Meade. In fact, he went back far beyond the immediate ancestry of Jim Meade, and laid the family tree out cold. When he had finished, or rather, run out of wind, Cactus added:

"'F that gallinipper thinks he can come here and take things away from that li'l gal—he's mishtaken."

"Absholutely and positive," agreed Tellurium. "We'll run him out of here sho fasht that it'll take sheven days of brill'nt shunshine to let his shadder catch up with him."

"I vote f'r immediate mashacree," piped up Archibald.

"Oh, yo're jus' im—im—petuous," said Cactus. "Tha's all—jist an impetuous pershon. Ol' impetuous."

"I'm Archibald," corrected the horse-wrangler.

"Gotta go eashy," warned Tellurium. "Might scare him. Wait'll he goes to bed. Then we'll schneak in on him."

"Tha's shenshible," agreed Cactus. "Then what'll we do to 'im?"

"Don't rush me," replied Tellurium. "I've got wonnerful ideas, but don' rush me, Cactus. Let's have 'nother dram."

They had several. Luckily Mace Adams, the sheriff, didn't find his deputy. He had warned Cactus to keep away from strong drink. It impaired the dignity of the office. It didn't help Cactus' own dignity either, because he became more bow-legged than ever. But they had decided to visit the iniquities of Clint Haverty on the victim of his choice.

"'F I didn' do shomethin'," declared Tellurium, "I could never look that sweet young lady in the fasch again."

"I'm with you to the bitter end," declared Cactus.

"Bit 'er end?" queried Archibald. "Esplain it to me, Tellurium."

"Have 'nother drink, Archibald," invited Cactus. "You've got to be drunk to obscure yore natural stu-pidity. Yore natural reshources are depleted, don't-cha know it."

"I'm jus' a horsh-wrangler," sobbed Archibald.

"Well, jus' don't tell the horshes, or you'll have trouble with 'em."

"The horshes know me," said Archibald.

"Don't get too familiar with 'em," advised Cactus. "The firs' thing you know they'll be wranglin' you. Have drink?"

"It makes me sick, thinkin' about Mary," said Tellurium.

"Don't worry," advised Cactus. "We'll do her proud."

Jim Bailey was getting ready for bed, when his door banged open and the three men came in. Cactus had a gun in his hand, waving it in wide circles, while Tellurium had a lariat-rope. Archibald was too drunk to more than

lend his moral support to the project. Jim Bailey was clad in some old pajamas, and it might be recorded that the entrance of these men frightened him.

"Schtop runnin' 'round like that!" Cactus ordered.

"I'm not moving," assured Jim Bailey.

"Good!" grunted Tellurium, shaking out the loop.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Jim. "What have I done?"

"It's that will," explained Tellurium. "You ain't gonna git it, I'll tell yuh that. This is yore finish, Misser Meade."

Tellurium suddenly flung the loop. Perhaps Tellurium's sense of direction was no better than Cactus', because the loop missed Jim Bailey by three feet and circled the lamp on the table. The next moment the room was as dark as a dungeon.

For the next twenty seconds or more, there was only the sound of strong men in mortal combat, the crash of a chair, the upsetting of the table. Then Tellurium's voice rang in triumph.

"I've got him! C'mon, grab the rope, and we'll drag him out."

WILLING hands helped him in the dark. They yanked the door open, dragged their struggling victim the length of the dark hall and down the stairs. It was a soundless voyage, except for the scuffling feet, the dragging of the victim. Old Hank Voigt, the hotel-keeper, gazed in open-mouthed wonder, his glasses balanced on the end of his long nose, as they came down the stairs.

The three men were almost at the bottom of the stairs, before their victim, roped around the legs, came bumping down behind them, taking the brunt of the bumping on that part of him designed by nature for such things as bumps.

Cactus backed over a chair and went sprawling, and the other two ceased

"You are an impostor!" said the lawyer (Chap. VI)

hauling when the victim landed on the floor-level.

"Wh-what's goin' on here?" blurted Old Hank. "What's Archibald done?"

Tellurium leaned against the desk, panting wearily, blinking. Beside him, hanging onto the rope, was Jim Bailey, his pajamas flopping. At the foot of the stairs sat Archibald Haas, his two legs roped, a pained expression on his face, together with a fast-swelling eye. Cactus got slowly to his feet. Tellurium stared at Jim Bailey, looked over at Archibald and said:

"Didja ever see such hair on a dog?"

"Dog?" queried Jim Bailey blankly.

"You!" snorted Tellurium. "What'r you doin', hangin' onto that rope, feller?"

Jim Bailey swallowed heavily. "You —you said, 'Grab the rope,' and I—I grabbed."

"Who hit me?" asked Archibald, getting loose and to his very unsteady feet. "I crave to know who hit me—that's what I've got a cravin' t' know."

Cactus sat down in a chair, tears running down his cheeks. Tellurium shrugged helplessly, while Jim Bailey leaned against the counter and tried to reason out a few things. Hank Voigt said:

"Young feller, you better go back and hide yore shame. There's a two-foot rip in the back of them drawers."

Jim Bailey went up the stairs in nothing flat, clutching at his rear. Tellurium looked Archibald over critically.

"Archibald, if yo're through foolin', we'll go home," he said.

"I'd love it," said Archibald soberly. "Yuh know, when I'm in the city I jist cain't re-lax."

Jim Bailey went back to his room, righted the table and managed to light the lamp. The chimney was broken, but the rest of the lamp was all right. Some oil had spilled, and the place smelled of kerosene, but Jim was too upset to care. Those men might have killed him.

He could not quite figure out just why he helped them haul Archibald Haas down the stairs. Perhaps he had been a bit confused. He was about to blow out the guttering lamp and go to bed, when someone knocked softly on his door.

It was Ed McLean, the lawyer. He glanced at the lamp, sniffed disgustedly and sat down.

"I came up the back stairs," he explained. "Didn't want to be seen coming up here. What happened a while ago? I heard Cactus Spears trying to explain it to the sheriff."

Jim Bailey told him what his experience had been, and McLean's comment was, "Drunken fools!"

"Not too drunk," corrected Jim nervously. "I don't like it. What is this deal, McLean? I am beginning to realize that you want control of this estate —but what do I get?"

"Keep your voice down," warned the lawyer. "These walls are mighty thin. You get control of the Lazy H. After that, I get financial backing and buy you out. Simple, isn't it?"

"You buy me out, eh?" said Jim quietly. "How much?"

ED McLEAN looked narrowly at Jim. Maybe this wasn't as easy as it had looked.

"How much do you expect?" he asked.

"All I can get. Tonight has proved to me that I am not here for my health."

"Oh, they were just drunk."

"You die just as dead when a drunk kills you, McLean. What about this Mary Deal?"

"She has no legal claims. She wasn't even legally adopted."

"I'm not talking about that. Why didn't this Haverty person name her in the will?"

McLean shrugged his shoulders, and Jim continued:

"That banker is suspicious, McLean. The will should have been read two

weeks ago. Me being here right on the dot is a coincidence that the banker doesn't want to swallow. And another thing I'd like to mention. If that banker stops to think things over, he'll realize I should have known that my mother's maiden name was Haverty. Me knowing I had relatives around here and not knowing the name!"

McLean scowled thoughtfully. "Bob Hawley said you were dumb," he remarked.

"I am, McLean. If I wasn't I'd leave here tomorrow. Just what will I make out of this deal?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"I see. From what I can learn, listening around, there must be more cash than that in the local bank. The ranch and cattle are worth over a hundred thousand. There was something else. I heard two men talking in the lobby and one said, 'The best gold prospect of them all is located on the Lazy H."

"A prospect doesn't mean a paying mine," said McLean.

"Taking it all in all, isn't ten thousand small money for my share of the deal, McLean?"

"All right," said the lawyer grimly. "How much do you want?"

"At least half."

"Ridiculous!"

Jim Bailey shrugged. "Fifty percent. Without me you are lost."

Finally the lawyer nodded. "All right. I'd like to punch Bob Hawley right in the nose."

"He would probably take it lying down," said Bailey dryly. "You make out the papers, McLean."

"Papers? You—do you—wait a minute! You mean papers on our agreement?"

"Why not?" asked Jim. "I'm afraid we don't trust each other."

"We better!" snapped the lawyer, getting to his feet. "There will be no papers."

"Suit yourself. I might claim more than fifty percent. In fact, I might take over the whole of the estate."

"Listen, my friend," warned the lawyer, "you play the game my way or you won't get anything. I'm not threatening you—I'm merely stating facts. Accidents happen. Think it over, and I'll talk with you later. Doublecrossing won't pay dividends in this part of the country."

McLean walked out and closed the door. This time Bailey locked it and went to bed. He pounded the pillow into shape and lay down. He wasn't in the habit of talking to himself, but he did say:

"Cliff De Haven, I don't wish you any bad luck, but I do wish you had lived to take over this job."

IV

CLINT HAVERTY had told Mary one day that she did not need to worry about her future and he had not even mentioned her in his will. She had nothing now, but she did not complain. Clint Haverty had been more than generous with her, and she was very grateful. The crew of the Lazy H had finished up their first day of the spring count, and the new man, Skeeter Smith, had proved himself a good worker with cattle.

Late in the evening, after the men had eaten, Skeeter drifted around to the front porch, smoking a cigaret, and found Mary sitting there alone.

"Hello," she said.

Skeeter sat down on one of the steps.

"It's shore nice around here, Ma'am," he said.

"I love it," she said quietly. "It has been my home for eight years. I love the sunsets, the sunrise and the moonlight."

"They're pretty," he admitted. "The boys was tellin' me about the readin' of that will, and I'd like to say that I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith," she said simply.

"Folks don't call me mister—I'm Skeet."

"They don't call me ma'am either."

"I reckon we're even."

"Is your home in Arizona?" she asked.

"Home? No, I haven't any home—Mary. Wherever I hang my hat. I'm sort of a pilgrim I reckon."

"I'll have to be a pilgrim now, I suppose," said Mary. "I can't make this my home much longer. As soon as the will is probated the new owner will take over the Lazy H."

"Yeah, I reckon that's how they do it. Life's a funny thing. Yuh never know what you've got—not for sure. Where will yuh go?"

"Oh, I suppose I can find a job—maybe."

"Yeah, I reckon so. Still, a woman can always marry somebody, and not have to work."

"I haven't given much thought to marriage," she said.

"I didn't dare to," grinned Skeeter. "Have you ever seen the feller they're givin' the Lazy H to?"

"I came in from Northport on the stage with him."

"Yeah? What sort of a feller is he, Mary?"

"Oh, just—well, I'd say he was average—as far as I could see. I didn't know he was the heir to the Lazy H at that time."

"City feller, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. He said he had always lived in a city."

Dell Howard, one of the cowboys, came around the corner.

"Skeet, do yuh want to ride to town with me and Dan?" he asked. Skeeter got to his feet.

"I'll be with yuh, Dell," he replied, and to Mary he said:

"Keep yore chin up, Mary. Speakin' as a drifter, the things yuh worry most about never happen. A feller died once and willed me his socks, but I never got 'em."

"What happened to them?" asked Mary.

"Oh, nothin' much. They buried him with 'em on before they read his will. See yuh later."

Going up the street in Pinnacle City that evening, Skeeter Smith and Dell Howard found Cactus Spears and Jim Bailey talking in front of the hotel. Dell introduced Skeeter to Cactus, who in turn introduced Jim to them.

"Meade, eh? So yo're the heir to the Lazy H?" Dell asked.

"That's what they say," replied Jim. No one had any comments, nor anything else, it seemed to Jim. Dell said:

"I'll go to the postoffice, before it closes, Skeet," and went on.

"Glad to have met yuh, Smith," Cactus said. "I've got to go to the office."

That left Jim Bailey and Skeeter Smith together.

"This happens all the time," Jim said. "As soon as they find out who I am they leave me alone. They resent me."

"Don't feel too bad about it," advised the tall cowpoke. "If you can prove that yo're entitled to the property, I don't see what they can do about it."

"Something happened last night," said Jim soberly.

"Yeah, I heard about that at supper tonight. Tellurium was tellin' us how Archibald got his black-eye."

"It wasn't funny—not to me."

"You was p r e j u d i c e d," grinned Skeeter.

"One man threatened me with a gun."

"Yeah, I reckon he did. But that's nothin', he didn't shoot. They resent you takin' over the Lazy H of course. But if you are entitled to it, why worry? They'll make yuh prove it."

"But suppose the court won't accept my proof?" asked Jim.

"That," replied Skeeter seriously,

"would be too bad. Folks in this kind of country believe the court is right."

"What do you mean?"

"If the court says yo're a fraud—they'll hang yuh."

"They wouldn't do that!" exclaimed Jim.

"My friend," said Skeeter earnestly, "there's boot-hills made up of tombstones of men who made that same remark and believed they were right. This is no country to double-cross the people. I'll see yuh later, Mister Meade."

JIM went back into the hotel and sat down. That was the second warning he had received on a double-cross. If he double-crossed Ed McLean he'd suffer, and if he double-crossed the people, they'd hang him.

"Fifty percent is entirely too little for my job," he told himself. "I should get it all—and a bonus."

Still, he mused, fifty percent of a hundred thousand dollars was an awful lot of money. And then the thought struck him that Ed McLean had been all too quick to agree to a fifty-fifty split. It wasn't what a lawyer would do. Offer ten percent, and then agree to a fifty percent. There was something fishy about the whole thing. Of course, he could understand why McLean did not want any written agreements.

Jim was very careful to lock his room that night, but no one came to mar his slumber.

It was after ten the next morning when Jim Bailey came down from his room. It was very hot in Pinnacle City, and the little hotel lobby was deserted. Jim flung his key on the desk and had turned toward the door when he heard a sound that was very much like a partly muffled shot.

Through the open doorway he could see several men over in front of the Antelope Saloon, looking across the street. Two of them started to cross the street, traveling at a fast pace. At that moment Hank Voigt, the hotelkeeper, skidded around to the entrance of the hotel, and fairly fell into the place.

"Bank r o b b e r y!" he exclaimed. "Bank robbery!"

He caught his balance and looked at Jim Bailey.

"Well, do somethin'!" he barked at Jim.

"Do what?" asked Jim, watching more men run from across the street. Hank flopped his arms helplessly.

"Shot at me," he said in amazement. "Imagine that, will yuh?"

"I shall try, Mr. Voigt."

"Well—good! You'll— There goes the sheriff!"

Jim Bailey walked out and went up to the bank, where a goodly crowd had gathered.

Cactus Spears was trying to keep them out of the bank.

[*Turn page*]

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"Thomas Estabrook is prob'ly dead," he reported. "We've sent for the coroner. Now, dang yuh, keep out and give us room!"

No one seemed to know any of the details. Thomas Estabrook was dead, sprawled behind the counter, a gun on the floor beside him. He had apparently tried to defend himself. The robber, or robbers, had left via the rear doorway. No money had been touched, the bandits frightened away after having shot the banker.

Old Hank Voigt said he didn't see how many men were in there. He had gone to make a deposit, and as he came into the doorway he heard a shot fired. A moment later a bullet blew splinters from a side of the doorway near his head, and he didn't stop running until he skidded into his own hotel.

Estabrook was alone in the bank at that time, the bookkeeper having gone to Northport to have a tooth repaired. He was expected to be back later in the day. The sheriff closed the bank for the day.

Jim Bailey saw Ed McLean at the bank, but did not get a chance to talk with him. Jim went back to the hotel and sat down on the shaded porch. The town buzzed over the killing of their banker, who was a much respected citizen. McLean sauntered over to the hotel porch and sat down with Jim.

"Well," he remarked quietly, "there is another coincidence. The one man we feared has been removed."

"I hadn't thought about that," said Jim. "It was a terrible thing."

"I have some news for you," said the lawyer. "I had a talk with the judge a while ago. He won't be back on the bench for another two weeks. We discussed the will, and I suggested that you be allowed to live at the Lazy H, at least, until the will has been probated. The judge said that if I was satisfied that you are the legal heir to the Lazy H, it will be all right for you to take up your residence out there. I said I was satisfied."

BAILEY thought it over for a while. "Meaning," he remarked, "that I must be out there with Mary Deal, who—"

"Hang it!" snapped the lawyer. "Can't you understand that she wasn't even mentioned in the will? She has no more claim than I have!"

"Pinnacle City seems to think she has, McLean."

"Hang Pinnacle City!"

"With pleasure, McLean—and Pinnacle City feels the same way about me. I have a feeling that the men at the Lazy H hate me, and if I am out there —I have heard that a broken neck is quite a nuisance."

"They won't harm you."

"Perhaps not. And you would benefit thereby, not having to pay my hotel expenses. Well, after all, why not?"

"Sure," nodded the lawyer. "If they wanted to hang you they could do it here as well as at the ranch. I'll take you out there this afternoon. Pack up your stuff."

Jim Bailey grinned. Pack up his stuff! He could just about carry it all in a folded handkerchief. McLean got to his feet, sighed with relief and promised to be after Jim in a little while.

Old Hank Voigt listened to Jim's explanation for leaving the hotel. He shook his head sadly.

"I'd like to wish you luck, young man," he said, "but it'll take more'n that to help yuh. There's so many different ways of causin' a demise around a ranch. Accidental shot, bad broncs, some knot-headed ol' cow, which recognizes you as the one who took her calf to market—oh, a lot of legitimate ways of openin' your earthly envelope. But, as I say,—or didn't I?"

"You said quite a lot, Mr. Voigt."

"Yeah, I reckon I covered the subject pretty well. Well, if I don't see yuh

again, it's nice to have knowed yuh, my boy."

Jim Bailey winced over the handshake—not the physical hurt, but the implied fact that he was rushing in where angels fear to tread.

He tried to grin, as he said, "I shall do my best."

"I'd advise that yuh get some overalls, boots and a gun, and don't be too slick-jawed. When yore face starts to itch, that's time enough to shave."

"I have never fired a gun, Mr. Voigt," said Jim. "Why, I might shoot myself —or somebody else."

"That's what they're made for, my boy—somebody else."

"I would hate to take that chance."

"You'd hate to take *that* chance?" Hank Voigt looked at him in amazement. "You—uh—yo're claimin' the Lazy H, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Huh! Gaggin' on a fox-tail and tryin' to swaller a stack of hay!"

"I don't believe I understand, Mr. Voigt."

"You run along and keep claimin', my boy, and maybe it'll dawn on yuh some day."

"Well, thanks, anyway; you've been nice to me."

"You paid and I ain't cravin' no cow-ranch."

V

ED McLEAN had his own horse and buggy. They tossed the valise into the back of the vehicle and headed for the Lazy H. Jim told the lawyer what Hank Voigt had said, but McLean only laughed.

"Hank is quite a joker," he said.

"I *hope* he was joking, McLean."

"Of course he was. We're all set now. Estabrook might have made trouble for us, but it is clear sailing from now on."

"I hope you are right, but something tells me that everything is not right. These people, as I understand it, do not always depend on the law to settle their troubles. The court might accept me as the legal and lawful heir to the Lazy H, but some of these cowpokes, as they are called, might not."

"Forget that part of it. They're law-abiding people. Just because they carry guns and talk a queer lingo they are not necessarily killers."

"Maybe not. I was thinking about that new man at the Lazy H. Skeeter Smith, I believe. He intimated that they hang a man for a doublecross in this country."

Ed McLean shot a side glance at Jim Bailey.

"O-o-oh!" he exclaimed. "Just why did he say that?"

"Oh, we were talking about my claims. I intimated that perhaps the court might not accept my credentials. He said that if the court decided that I was a fraud the people would probably hang me."

"Bosh!" snorted the lawyer. "My friend, you talk too blasted much! Let others do the talking, you listen."

"Of course," remarked Jim, "my life doesn't mean anything to you, McLean. All you are interested in is using me for a cat's-paw. You want the Lazy H. If this deal works out, very likely you will get it. We are a fine pair of crooks."

"And we can't afford to fall out, remember that, Jim."

"Remember that yourself, McLean. I will not be bossed. You may suggest something, but don't order. I've taken orders all my grown-up life and I don't like it."

"I'll remember that, Jim. Sometimes you rub me the wrong way."

"Sorry. I am going to need some overalls and boots. And if you know where I can get a gun—"

"What in the world would you do with a gun?"

"That," replied Jim soberly, "is something that no man knoweth, until the

experiment has been made. I want to be a man among men."

"I see," replied Ed McLean. "Well, I'd offer good odds that the first time you pull that gun, you'll be the only horizontal one among the men."

Mary Deal was the only one to greet Jim Bailey with a smile. Tex Parker turned and walked away, and Tellurium backed into the kitchen. There was an extra room in the ranchhouse, which was turned over to Jim. Ed McLean talked quite a while with the foreman, and then came up to have a few words with Tellurium, out at the wood-pile.

"Listen t' me, McLean!" Tellurium griped. "Do you think I'm going to cook good food for that anteloper?"

"The word is interloper," corrected McLean.

"The word," declared the cook, "is no!"

"You need a job, don't you, Tellurium? Well, just remember that this young man is the heir to the Lazy H."

"You don't need t' rub it in. As far as a job is concerned I can stretch m' apron at any spread west of the Mississippi. Don't tell me what I've got to do. You keep up this yappin', and you won't be hired to misquote law to a strange dog in this man's country."

"Look at it this way," suggested McLean. "The young man can't help that he was Clint Haverty's nephew."

Tellurium thought about that.

"All right. In mem'ry of Clint Haverty, I'll feed him. But I ain't goin' to nurse him along. The boys won't like it. He won't be welcome, but if he can stand it we'll try.

"That's fine, Tellurium. You're sensible."

"You git out of here, before I split yuh with the axe. Sensible! Huh!"

McLEAN went back to Pinnacle City in a happy frame of mind. At least the expense problem was settled. He even decided to get Jim Bailey some boots and overalls. As far as the gun was concerned, he felt that Jim was a little too new for things like six-shooters.

Jim soon found that he was a pariah at the Lazy H. He ate with the cowboys and they snubbed him completely. The food was plentiful and very good. Archibald Haas was still sporting a discolored eye, and he looked daggers at Jim Bailey, remembering that Jim had helped Tellurium and Cactus drag him down the hotel stairs. Mary ate alone, and after supper that night, Jim went out on the porch, where Mary was sitting.

"Did you enjoy your supper?" she asked pleasantly.

"I enjoyed the food," he replied, "but the company was entirely anti-me."

Mary nodded sadly. "I'm sorry, Jim," she said. "It isn't a thing that I can help. I have talked with the boys, but they all have minds of their own."

"I understand," he said quietly. "They treated me the same way in town. Mary, let me ask you a question. If I left this country, gave up this inheritance, would you get the Lazy H?"

Mary shook her head. "No, I am not —was not, I mean—related to Clint Haverty. It would go to Ace and Dick Haverty because they are the next of kin—all his remaining relatives, as far as anyone knows."

"I have seen them both," said Jim. "I think I'll stay."

"I believe you are sensible, Jim. Your going away would not help me in the least."

"Mary, tell me something about Clint Haverty. Didn't he ever tell you that you might share in the estate?"

"He told me that I would have nothing to worry about."

"I see. Was he all right physically and mentally?"

"The only thing on earth wrong with Clint Haverty, as far as anyone knew, was bad eyesight. He didn't want any-

one to know his eyes were bad; and he wouldn't wear glasses. I read most of his letters to him."

"He died a natural death, I suppose?" Jim asked.

"Oh, didn't you hear?" asked Mary.

"Only that he died, Mary."

"He was thrown from his horse, coming back from Pinnacle City, and had a skull fracture. He usually rode a bad horse, and the doctor says this one threw him and then kicked him in the head."

"I didn't know that," sighed Jim. "I am afraid of horses."

"You'll get over that," laughed Mary. "In a few months you'll be wearing chaps and riding the hills with the rest of the boys."

"It sounds very romantic, but I still don't believe I will."

Skeeter Smith finished supper and came around to the porch to enjoy a cigaret. After the customary greetings, he said to Jim:

"If yo're goin' to own and operate the Lazy H, here's somethin' you ought to know, Meade. The Lazy H is bein' robbed. At least, this is the opinion of Tex Parker and the boys."

"Tex has said that several times, Skeeter," said Mary.

"I know. He says it shows up in the count. Tex has gone to town to talk with the sheriff. This is serious, Mary."

"How does one steal a cow?" asked Jim.

Skeeter's brows lifted slightly, and he glanced at Mary, who was smothering a smile.

"The methods," replied Skeeter, "vary."

"I see," remarked Jim vaguely. "I really didn't know."

There was no conversation for a while. Then Skeeter said:

"How do you like the cattle country, Mr. Meade?"

"I am afraid of it," replied Jim honestly.

SKEETER smiled. "The thing for you to do is to get on a bronc and learn it first-hand."

"A bronc is a horse, isn't it, Mr. Smith?"

"It is—and call me Skeeter."

"Thank you. I have never ridden a horse, but I suppose I must learn. First I must get some overalls and boots, I suppose. Then I can get a gun and—"

"Wait!" Skeeter laughed. "Have you ever fired a six-shooter?"

"Never. But I supposed—"

"You won't need a gun. The longer yuh can get along without a gun, the better off you'll be. Take my advice, Jim, learn to ride and rope, brand, judge beef and all that. That six-shooter don't brand yuh as a cowpoke—it brands yuh as a man, who, for some reason or another, expects trouble to cut his trail some day."

"Thank you, Skeeter—you have been very kind to me."

Skeeter laughed and got to his feet.

"My friend," he said, "somewhere in the Bible, I believe it says somethin' about being cautious about them who come bearin' gifts."

"But you haven't brought me any gifts, Skeeter."

"Friendship is a gift."

"You mean that I should beware friendship?"

"Until it has been tried and proved—yeah."

Skeeter went back to the bunk-house. Jim said:

"Mary, he is a queer sort of cowboy, don't you think?"

"Yes," replied the girl. "He is different. I believe he would make a wonderful friend, and I would hate to be his enemy."

"I don't believe I have ever had a real friend, Mary."

"Few people ever do, Jim. Uncle Clint used to say that a friend was someone who knew all about you, but liked you in spite of it."

"In my case," said Jim slowly, "I could hardly expect it."

"In the morning," said Mary, "I'll ask Archibald to saddle a horse for you, Jim. You might as well learn to ride as soon as you can."

"You are too kind to me, Mary," he said earnestly.

"Say that tomorrow evening and I'll believe you," she said dryly. . . .

It was midafternoon next day at the Lazy H. Archibald Haas sat on the corral fence in the shade of a sycamore and looked at Jim Bailey, astride an ancient charger called Peter the Hermit, so named from his habit of staying alone as much as possible.

"That there lump on the front end of the saddle," explained Archibald, "is the horn. It's used to dally a rope around, not to be hugged. If yuh cain't think of anythin' to do with yore extra hands, let 'em dangle, they won't fall off."

"*I* might," suggested Jim Bailey wearily.

"Uh-huh—yuh might. Now, the thing t' do," suggested Archibald, "when the horse starts lopin', you try and lope with him. You and Pete ort to git together. And when he trots, brace yore legs. No use of him goin' one way and you the other. And another thing; that horse is rein-broke. Yuh don't have to take holt of one rein with both hands and yank his jaw loose. Try it again."

At supper time Jim Bailey staggered to the house. Peter the Hermit didn't stagger at all, he lay down where he was. This was almost too much for his ancient bones. Archibald Haas said to Mary:

"All he needs is the finishin' touches."

"What do you mean, Archie?" she asked.

"Jist shoot him and put him out of his misery."

"You'll not shoot Peter the Hermit!"

" 'Course not. I didn't mean him."

VI

JIM BAILEY was in bad shape next morning. He was barely able to limp to the breakfast table. The rest of the crew had eaten and gone away, long before Jim Bailey came to breakfast. Archibald Haas was there.

"I've got a bronc all saddled for yuh," he said.

Jim Bailey groaned.

"This'n is a little faster than Pete," Archibald said. "And more durable."

Tellurium placed Jim's breakfast on the table, stepped back and looked Jim over appraisingly.

"I found a pair of boots for yuh," he said. "They ain't no Sunday specimens, but they've got heels. You've got to have heels."

"What I need," groaned Jim, "is two new legs, two new arms and a headache tablet."

"Does it hurt yuh to set down?" asked Archibald.

"It does," replied Jim grimly, "but it also hurts me to stand up or lie down."

"Didja ever try hangin' by yore hands?" asked Tellurium soberly.

Archibald stood in the kitchen doorway, yawned widely and announced:

"Here comes that knot-headed lawyer from Pinnacle."

Jim didn't want to talk with Ed McLean. In fact, he didn't want to talk with anybody, but McLean came up to the kitchen. Hot weather gave McLean a beaded complexion and he continually polished his bald head with a pink handkerchief. Jim could see that the lawyer was not in good humor. He refused breakfast curtly.

Jim finished and limped outside with McLean, who led him down by the corral, where he could talk without being overheard.

"In my mail last evening," said McLean, a bit grimly, "I got a letter and a clipping from a friend of mine in Frisco. The clipping deals with the

death of Bob Hawley."

"Bob Hawley?" asked Jim quickly. "Is Bob dead?"

Ed McLean looked at Jim Bailey, and his expression was not exactly friendly.

"According to the time element," he replied, "Bob Hawley must have died the night before you left San Francisco. Bob Hawley told me that your name was De Haven."

"Well," said Jim, "is that remarkable?"

"According to this clipping — yes. The body believed to be that of Jim Bailey has been identified as that of Cliff De Haven, and the police are looking for Jim Bailey, who roomed with De Haven. They would like to know why De Haven had articles on his person, which identified him as Bailey."

Jim Bailey thought the thing over carefully. It would be easy to explain to the police, as far as he was concerned. He said:

"Well?"

"You," said the lawyer accusingly, "are an impostor."

Jim Bailey laughed, "So the pot calls the kettle black, eh?"

"You can tell me the truth, Bailey," McLean said. "I don't want the San Francisco police tracing you to Pinnacle City."

"They won't get that far," said Jim, and proceeded to tell the lawyer exactly what happened.

"So De Haven merely appropriated your suit, eh?"

"That's all. I took his letter—and took a chance."

"All right. I'll go back now. What makes you so lame?"

"Learning to ride a horse," groaned Jim.

"Stay off the bad ones," warned the lawyer. "At least, stay off them, until this deal is finished. I need a live heir to the Lazy H."

Ed McLean drove away, and Archibald came down from the kitchen, carrying a pair of old, high-heel boots. The heels were worn off on the outside, indicating that the owner had been bow-legged.

"They ain't much—but they'll help," Archibald said.

LEANING against the corral fence, Jim painfully pulled them on. They were a little tight, but not too bad. Walking was difficult, especially with his aching legs. There was an old pair of overalls and an old sombrero hanging on a peg in the stable. The overalls were tight but the sombrero was loose.

Archibald looked him over approvingly.

"Right now," he declared, "yo're three looks and a whoop from bein' a tenderfoot. I ain't sure whether you'd be diagnosed as a broken-down cowpoke, or a up-and-comin' sheepherder. However, my friend, you won't scare the cows."

Mary came down to the stable. She wanted to be sure that no tricks were being played on Jim. When she saw him she emitted a smothered shriek, and he laughed heartily.

"How do I look, Mary?" he asked.

"How do you feel?" she whispered huskily.

"Terrible."

"You look just that way, Jim. Are you going to ride again?"

"I am going to try."

Archibald came out with a Roman-nosed sorrel, saddled and bridled. There was little comparison between this horse and Peter the Hermit, except that they both had four legs. Mary said:

"Do you think he's capable of handling Blondy, Archie?"

"Well," replied the wrangler, "I figure that Blondy is the only horse around here capable of handling him. He won't buck. You know Blondy. If he gits four, five miles away from the ranch, he'll come back in spite of hell and high-water."

Mary nodded, and watched Jim get into the saddle. It was a very painful procedure, and Jim's face showed it.

"Don't go too far," she advised. "If you get lost, give Blondy his head, and he'll come home. And if he wants to come home, don't try to stop him; it makes him mad."

"I shall do my best," replied Jim.

"You let Blondy do that, you jist set," advised Archibald.

Mary shook her head as Jim disappeared down an old road.

"You ain't worryin' about that gallinipper, are yuh?" asked the wrangler.

"Not worrying, no," she replied. "I didn't think he would have the nerve to get on a horse today."

Archibald chuckled. "Not only that, but he looks almost human in them clothes, Mary."

"People's ideas of humanity differ, I'm afraid," said the girl.

Jim Bailey soon found out that Blondy was not like Peter the Hermit. Blondy *wanted* to go places. Mary had said that Blondy would bring him home; so why worry? There was a cooling breeze in the hills, which made riding pleasant. He struck a trail, leading up through a wide swale, and sent Blondy over it in a swinging walk.

For the first time in his life Jim Bailey felt freedom. He was not going any certain place, and he was not going home until the horse decided to go back. All he had to do was enjoy the scenery. The sore muscles were much easier now, and he began to like riding.

At the top of the swale they found another well-worn trail, and kept on going. For an hour or more they followed trail after trail, until Jim began to wonder how long before Blondy would feel the urge to go back to the ranch. By this time they were high in the breaks, where he could see the blue haze of the valley. There were cattle along the trail, wild-eyed creatures, moving quickly aside into the brush. Two deer broke out of a thicket and went bouncing into the heavy cover. It was all very new to Jim Bailey. Suddenly Blondy stopped short, shaking his head. Jim booted him gently, but the horse whirled, almost upsetting his rider, struck a down-trail through the brush, and went along at a swinging walk. Jim laughed aloud. Blondy was going home.

It seemed that Blondy was taking a short-cut, instead of going around the way they came. The trail was steep, and the hoofs of the horse cut deep into the dirt, angling down into a canyon. They struck the bottom and kept on going down through a mesquite thicket, where the trail was almost too narrow. Those mesquite claws slashed at Jim's overalls and boots, and now he understood why cowpokes wore leather chaps.

Suddenly they broke into an opening, possibly two acres in size. Just ahead, standing against the edge of the brush, were two saddled horses. Near the horses were two men, one of them kneeling down beside a roped yearling. A few feet away was a tiny pile of sticks, a thin spiral of almost colorless smoke indicating the branding fire. Blondy stopped short, and one of the horses nickered softly.

BOTH men whirled, the one lurching to his feet. Jim started to call a greeting to them, when a gun flamed and he felt Blondy jerk back from the impact of the bullet. Another shot blasted, and Jim found himself pitching into space as the horse fell sideways. Only slightly dazed from the fall, Jim got to his feet, dimly realizing that these men were shooting at him. A bullet tugged at his sleeve, and Jim Bailey had a sudden urge to get as far away as possible in the least space of time.

It has been said that it is impossible to run fast in high-heel boots, but Jim

Bailey disproved this theory. It was the first time he had ever been obliged to run in order to save his life, and he made the best of it. There was no soreness left in his legs, and he went into that heavy brush with all the dispatch of a frightened cottontail. Not only did he go into the brush, but he kept right on going, while bullets whistled past him.

Finally he sprawled, exhausted, and waited for the worst. He could not hear any sounds of pursuit. A half-hour passed, but there were no sounds, except the buzzing of a bee, the call of a bird. Jim got carefully to his feet. Something else buzzed near him, and he instinctively held still. After a few moments a diamond-back rattler slowly uncoiled and slid easily away in the undergrowth. Jim Bailey shivered. The snake had rattled not over five feet away.

Cautiously he made his way back to the cleared space. There was Blondy, flat on his side, but no sign of the two men. He went to the horse, but the animal was dead. Jim's heart sank. He knew it was a long way back to the Lazy H, but in just what direction?

"It must be downhill," reasoned the young man, "because we came all the way uphill. If I ever get out of this alive, I've had all I want of the West."

It was after sundown that evening, when Skeeter Smith came riding along the base of the hills north of the Lazy H. He saw a man stumble out of the mouth of a small canyon. The man stopped in the open, looking around. When he saw Skeeter he ducked down behind some brush. He was acting so queerly that Skeeter approached him cautiously.

It was Jim Bailey, scratched and torn, his face bleeding, hands cut. One sleeve of his shirt was entirely gone, the rest of the garment in tatters. One bare knee protruded from a split overall leg, and there were cactus spines in that knee.

"Meade! What happened to you?" Skeeter gasped.

"I've been walking," replied Jim wearily.

"Yeah, I reckon you've been doin' somethin'. Here," Skeeter slipped his left foot out of the stirrup, "hook your foot into that stirrup and come up behind me."

"You mean two on one horse?"

"That's right. Hook that stirrup and I'll help yuh on. Don't stand there like a billy-owl—climb up."

With his help, Jim managed to get up behind Skeeter. He drew a deep breath.

"I went riding and somebody shot my horse," he said.

"They did? Well, that's interestin'. Shot yore horse, eh?"

"Tried to shoot me, too," complained Jim. "Are you sure you know the way

[*Turn page*]

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back to the ranch? I think you're going the wrong way."

"Yore compass is busted, pardner," chuckled Skeeter.

"I feel completely busted," said Jim. "Even the snakes buzzed at me."

The boys were all at the ranch, waiting for supper when the two men rode in. Mary was anxious over the safety of Jim. They mopped him off with water and put his blistered feet to soak, while Archibald, with the aid of pliers, began taking out cactus spines.

Jim told them what had happened to him and Blondy. No one offered sympathy. Tex Parker asked Jim if he could find the spot where they had killed Blondy.

"I hope not—ever," Jim said.

Tex said, "Let's eat, boys. We'll have to watch the buzzards to find Blondy and get that saddle back. It sounds to me like somebody was doin' some range-brandin' on other people's cows. That could be their only reason for smokin' up the kid. I wish I'd been in his place."

"You'd prob'ly stayed in the canyon," said Tellurium. "Come and git it—before I dump it out!"

Jim managed to hobble to the table and ate a good meal though he was one mass of sore spots.

"Soon's yuh git ready for bed," Tellurium said, "I'll sneak in with the horse-liniment. That's a he-man's cure for everythin' from ingrown toenails to dandruff. How do you like bein' a cowpoke?"

"Ask him that in the mornin'," advised Dell Howard, "he's sound asleep."

VII

SKEETER SMITH went to Pinnacle City alone that evening. When he tied his horse at the saloon hitch-rack, he saw a light in Ed McLean's office. The lawyer was working on some papers as the tall, lean cowpoke came in. The fat lawyer shoved the papers aside and leaned back in his chair, wondering what caused the newcomer at the Lazy H to come into his office. Skeeter said "Howdy" and sat down.

"What can I do for you, sir?" asked McLean, reaching for his pipe on the desk-top.

"I thought yuh might like to know that Jim Meade rode into the hills today and some rustlers shot the horse from under him. The kid had to walk home, and he's pretty sick of his job."

"Job?" queried the lawyer. "He is not working for the Lazy H."

"Well," drawled Skeeter, "we'll call it a deal, instead, eh?"

McLean puffed violently at his empty pipe, his eyes watching the lean face opposite him.

"Deal?" queried McLean quietly.

"Yeah—deal." Skeeter leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"I want in on this deal, McLean," he said.

McLean stared at Skeeter, but encountered only a pair of level, gray eyes. He swallowed painfully and looked at his pipe.

"I don't understand what you mean," he protested.

"No?" Skeeter smiled slowly. "What would you say if I told yuh that I know Jim Meade?"

"I'd say you lied—unless you mean the Jim Meade at the Lazy H. He's the only Jim Meade in this deal."

Skeeter shook his head. "Yo're wrong, my friend. I know the real Jim Meade, the only one."

"That is a lie—and I know it's a lie!" snapped McLean.

"Clint Haverty told yuh that Jim Meade was dead, didn't he? Jim Meade was supposed to have been killed seven years ago in a mine explosion in Colorado."

"Clint Haverty said he was!" snapped McLean. "What are you driving at, Smith?"

"Clint Haverty's idea of willin' a

ranch to a dead man."

Ed McLean realized that he had fallen into his own trap. He looked slit-eyed at the tall cowboy and said harshly:

"What's your price, Smith?"

"What does the kid get?" asked Skeeter.

"Half—I suppose."

"All right—I'll take half of your half, McLean."

"By what right?" snapped McLean hotly. "Why, you—"

"Think it over," advised Skeeter calmly. "I can ruin yore deal, McLean. And don't try any funny stuff."

"What do you mean, Smith?"

"Well," grinned Skeeter, "you might shoot yourself and ruin the whole deal. I'd like to make some big money."

Skeeter got up and walked out, closing the door quietly behind him. Ed McLean went to the doorway. In the lights from the Antelope Saloon he saw Skeeter Smith ride away from the hitch-rack, heading back to the Lazy H. McLean sat down at his desk, his expression very grim.

"I don't dare tell Bailey," he said to himself. "He'd get so frightened he'd leave. Half of my half, eh? Why, the poor fool, who does he think I am, anyway? If anybody thinks he can stop me from making this deal—let him try."

He put on his hat, put out the light, locked the front door and went out the rear entrance to his small stable. McLean kept a buggy horse in the stable, but that horse was also a very good saddler.

ACHING in every joint, and reeking of horse-liniment, Jim Bailey sat on the ranch-house porch, his swollen feet encased in a pair of Tellurium's old slippers. Cactus Spears, the deputy sheriff, and Tellurium, the cook, sat on the steps, discussing Jim's adventure with the rustlers. Cactus said complainingly:

"If you could only remember what color them horses was. They didn't happen to be pink, did they?"

"Pink?" queried Jim Bailey. "They might have been."

"Pink!" snorted Tellurium. "Why not green?"

"Not this time of year," said Cactus. "Most of 'em are ripe now. No, I don't think you'd find a green one, Tellurium."

"No, it's a litle late, I reckon," nodded the cook soberly.

"The boys are watchin' the buzzards today?" asked Cactus.

Tellurium nodded. "That's the only way they'll ever find the saddle and bridle, Cactus. Jim ain't got no idea where he met his Waterloo."

Cactus grinned. "You must have went awful fast, Jim," he remarked.

"I have no recollection of speed nor effort," replied Jim seriously. "One moment I was there by the horse, being shot at, and the next moment I was yards away from there, hiding under a bush with a snake."

"Yea-a-ah," drawled T e l l u r i u m, scratching his chin, "I'll betcha the snake took one look at him and said, 'No use strikin' at him, 'cause he's too blamed fast.' "

After a short pause Tellurium said:

"He's shore hard on the rollin' stock of this here ranch. Poor Ol' Peter the Hermit is all stove up, and Blondy has done gone. I dunno what *caballo* we'll issue to him next."

"If *caballo* means horse—banish the thought," said Jim, r u b b i n g the cramped calf of one leg.

Mary came from the main room of the house and joined them.

"We're wonderin' what horse to give Jim next," said Cactus.

"I think he got off very lucky," said Mary. "Two men shooting at him, getting lost in the hills and all that. It was quite an experience."

"It shore was," agreed Cactus, getting to his feet. "I'll have to go back to town and tell Mace Adams that Jim

didn't stop to look at the colors of the horses. See yuh later, folks."

The boys came in from work that evening, but had not found the dead horse. Tellurium wanted to go to town after supper. He asked Archibald to go along, but Archibald had a poker date at the bunk-house; so Tellurium asked Jim Bailey to go along. Skeeter Smith and Tex Parker went in ahead of them. Jim had to wear the old slippers, but most of the pains had left him.

Tellurium and Jim rode in the ranch buckboard. Tellurium had a grocery order, and left Jim to his own devices. In front of the hotel a little later Jim met Ed McLean. The lawyer looked disgruntled over something, and his eyes showed the need of sleep. He looked Jim over critically.

"You're a fine looking heir to the Lazy H."

Jim Bailey looked back grimly at the fat lawyer.

"You don't need to be sarcastic, McLean. I darn near got killed yesterday."

"Yes, I heard about it. You keep out of the hills."

His tone made Jim Bailey angry. He flared up.

"Don't try to order me around," he said. "I've told you that before. I've got a mighty good notion to throw the whole deal back at you, and leave this country."

"Oh, you have, have you? Listen to me, Bailey." McLean came in closer, lowering his voice. "You're not leaving here."

"I'm not, eh? Who will stop me?"

"I will—and mighty quick!"

Jim Bailey took aim. Never in his life had he hit a man, but now he hit Ed McLean smack on the nose with every ounce of muscle at his command. It dropped the lawyer squarely on the broad seat of his pants. Then, in a half-hysterical move, Bailey reached down, grasped one of McLean's ears, yanked his head sideways and yelled into the upturned ear:

"You and who else, McLean?"

IF McLEAN knew, he did not answer. Jim Bailey stepped back and looked around. Skeeter Smith had emerged from the hotel doorway, and was looking at him, a queer grin on his face.

"That was a funny thing to do, wasn't it?" Jim asked.

"It looked funny to me," replied Skeeter.

Ed McLean got slowly to his feet, one hand clutching at his bleeding nose. He did not say anything—just went across the street to his office. Several people had seen what happened, and they looked curiously at Jim Bailey. Tellurium was loading some boxes into the buckboard in front of the general store.

"I guess Tellurium is ready to go back to the ranch," Jim said.

"Yeah, he's loadin' up," agreed Skeeter, and watched Jim Bailey walk up the sidewalk.

"You and who else?" parroted Skeeter Smith to himself. "I wonder what McLean said to him?"

Jim Bailey and Tellurium rode back to the ranch.

"What's itchin' yuh, Kid?" the cook asked. "You ain't talkin' none."

"I knocked a man down on the street," replied Jim.

Tellurium said, "Whoa!" and slowed the team down to a walk.

"You knocked a man down?" he asked incredulously.

"I struck him right on the nose. You see, I never hit a man before."

"Yuh mean yuh intended to hit him?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"Hm-m-m-m! Who was he?"

"Ed McLean, the lawyer."

"McLean, the—you ain't jokin' with Ol' Tellurium, are yuh?"

"No, I'm not joking, Tellurium. I knocked him down."

"Well, man, howdy!" exclaimed the

cook. "Son, yo're improvin'. Yessir, Arizona is makin' a man out of yuh. Well, well!"

"Was it terrible?" asked Jim quickly.

"In a way—yeah, it shore was."

"In a way? In what way?" asked Jim.

"I didn't git a chance to see it done. I'd have loved it."

Jim Bailey drew a deep breath. "You don't like McLean?"

"Well, I never sent him any love and kisses, son."

The boys in the bunkhouse didn't believe Tellurium until Skeeter Smith came back and told them the same story. There was so much speculation over the reasons for it that the poker game broke up. Dell Howard said soberly:

"It kinda sounds like he might have some Haverty blood in him, at that. Clint Haverty would poke yuh in the nose as quick as he'd look at yuh. Well, it won't hurt the looks of McLean's nose, anyway. It might perk him up a little bit."

"The funny thing about it," remarked Skeeter, "was the fact that after he knocked McLean down, he grabbed one of McLean's ears, yanked his head sideways and yelled in his ear, 'You and who else?' "

"Maybe," remarked Tex Parker, "we've underestimated the boy."

"He's been after me to git him a six-gun," said Tellurium.

"Hold him off," said Dell Howard. "We all want to live until after the ranch changes hands."

VIII

AT THE request of relatives the body of Thomas Estabrook was shipped to Philadelphia. The incoming head of the Cattlemen's Bank was James Wells, a new man to the country. Ed McLean, still suffering from a sore nose and outraged feelings, lost no time in taking up the matter of the Haverty will with the new banker. Wells, naturally, had no suspicions, and McLean was very persuasive. Wells said he was willing to leave everything to the court and McLean breathed easier.

However, McLean was far from satisfied with the way things were going. Jim Bailey had proved belligerent and Skeeter Smith had thrown a monkey-wrench into McLean's machinery. Between the two of them it would seem that McLean could expect very little from the Lazy H.

There was some small activity around the Lazy H that morning. Mary was upstairs, watching through a window, while Tellurium and Archibald were safely ensconced in the kitchen. Sitting on a corral fence near the stable were Jim Bailey and Cactus Spears. Jim was examining an old Colt .41, with a sickle-bill handle, and Cactus was patiently explaining the deal.

"It'll cost yuh twenty dollars, but I'm willin' to wait for my money, until yuh —until the court passes judgment on yuh, if yuh live that long. Anyway, I'd get the gun back—I hope."

"What do you mean—if I live that long, Cactus?"

"The way you've been handlin' that hog-leg would indicate a awful sudden de-mise for you—or somebody."

"I can learn, can't I?" asked Jim.

"Do you know what a moot is?" asked Cactus soberly.

"A moot? No, I don't believe I do, Cactus."

"Well, this is a moot question. You've got a long ways t' go, before you ain't a menace to yourself. After that, yo're a menace to everybody else."

"I want to learn how to handle a gun," sighed Jim. "I feel it is necessary, Cactus."

"All right, we'll try her again. You don't shoot with both hands. If that was the right way, they'd put two handles on it. That there thing is the hammer. That point on the face of it is supposed to puncture the cap on the

shell, not yore left thumbnail, as heretofore demonstrated.

"That doo-jingus under there is the trigger. Yuh don't *yank* it. Now, let's get together on it. Go ahead and cock it. He-e-ey! Don't point it at my knee! That's better. Now it's cocked. Grip it in yore right hand. That's right. Now, yuh place the first finger of yore right hand around the trigger and—"

Wham! Part of Cactus' left heel disappeared, the gun bucked out of Jim's hand and fell behind him and Cactus Spears swiftly bow-legged his way toward the house and safety!

"Come back here and show me something!" called Jim, but Cactus merely flinched and kept on going into the kitchen.

"I hope yo're satisfied!" barked Tellurium. "Git away from that door—it's thin wood!"

"Look at m' boot-heel!" complained Cactus.

"Too bad it wasn't yore head," said Tellurium. "Bringin' a gun out to that kid! He can't shoot."

Jim Bailey came up and peered through the window at them.

"Git away from there, you—you menace!" howled Archibald, grabbing at the curtain.

"I can't shoot any more—this gun is empty," called Jim.

"Good!" breathed Cactus. "He shot twice accidently and three times unconsciously. One thing—he ain't scared of the gun."

"I suppose yuh call that a virtue!" snorted Tellurium. "I was out there, cuttin' wood, and that first bullet hit the axe."

"I done told him to select a simple target for his first shot," sighed Cactus.

"Yuh mean—he was really shootin' *at* Tellurium?" gasped Archibald.

"That's enough out of you!" snorted Tellurium? "You was scared so bad yuh ate two yeast-cakes, thinkin' they was crackers!"

"I thought they tasted kinda fuzzy. They won't hurt me, will they?"

"Keep out of the sun," advised Tellurium. "If they ever get heated up and start to raise—you better tie yore feet down."

JIM walked around and sat down on the porch, placing the gun beside him. Mary came out, and he smiled at her.

"Lesson over, Jim?" she asked.

"I ran out of ammunition—and instructors," he replied. "I am not what you would call an apt pupil, Mary."

"You will learn," she said encouragingly.

"I doubt it. I never do anything well. In fact, all I know is how to keep a set of books and not too well, at that. Out here, all that seems so far away and hazy, like something you dream and try to remember."

"Don't you love it out here?" she asked.

"Love?" Jim smiled slowly. "No, I can't say I do. I don't fit in, Mary. You see, at first I thought most everybody out here was rather dumb. When I try to do the things that they do, I know I am the dumb one."

"You'll learn, Jim," she said quietly. "After you have owned the Lazy H for a while, you wouldn't trade one little dogie for a whole city. You'll never want to go back there."

Jim shook his head slowly. "I don't understand you, Mary. You will be the only one really to suffer, and still you don't resent me. Everybody else resents me."

"Why should I?" she asked. "It isn't my ranch."

"But don't you resent the fact that—that Clint Haverty did not leave you anything?"

"No, Jim, it is not resentment. It hurt a little—at first."

"You're a mighty sweet girl," said

Jim slowly, but he did not look at her as he said it. "I think you are the sweetest girl I have ever known. I've always been afraid of girls—but I'm not afraid of you."

There was a chuckle in Mary's voice as she said:

"You're not trying to make love to me, are you, Jim?"

"No," replied Jim, getting to his feet. "I—I couldn't do that. I guess I just wanted you to know that I appreciate you. I don't know anything about love—except that it should be honest."

Then he walked off the porch and went down to the stable. Tellurium came out cautiously and squinted at his back.

"He didn't find no more shells, did he, Mary?" asked the cook.

"I don't think so, Tellurium; there's his gun on the porch."

"He ain't such a bad feller, Mary," remarked the cook. "I don't reckon he'd hurt anybody intentionally, but, man, what he'd do to yuh accidently! I'd better put that gun away before he finds some more shells. He's got more, 'cause Cactus gave him almost a full box."

"I'm sure Jim will be careful next time, Tellurium."

"He will, huh? Listen, my dear, if he was jist six times more careful next time, there wouldn't be enough of us left to go to the polls next election. What he needs is a pea-shooter with a busted spring."

Archibald found a quart of hard liquor hidden in the oat-box at the stable that afternoon. Some one of the cowpokes had cached it there, but Archibald wasn't choosey. He took his liquor where he found it. Then he notified Tellurium and they went down to the stable and sat on the oat-box. They didn't need anything for a chaser. After a few drinks Tellurium said thoughtfully:

"Archie, I've been doin' some thinkin' f'r myself."

"Gettin' yore brain all wrinkled, huh?" remarked Archie, who was not interested in Tellurium's conclusions. "Hit her again, she's still a-standin' up."

THEY had another drink.

"Yuh know, Archie," Tellurium said, "I've been cogitatin' to myself. Why didn't Clint leave somethin' to Mary? Don't answer that—you'll only confuse me. He loved her like a daughter, and you know it."

"What'r yuh tryin' t' do—make me cry?"

"I'm tryin' to make yuh understand, Archie. There's been crooked work done. What'd Clint care about this young gallinipper? Why, he never seen Jim Meade in his life. Archie," Tellurium lowered his voice to a stage-whisper, "there's dirty work at the crossroads."

"Which one?" asked Archibald.

"Yo're a big help," sighed Tellurium. "What I mean is this; that will ain't right. Clint Haverty never intended it thataway."

"There's three, four big swallers left for each of us," said Archibald, "and we don't want the owner of that bottle to find us. We'll hide the empty in the oats."

"Archibald," said Tellurium severely, "how good are you as a hold-up man?"

Archibald stared owl-eyed at Tellurium.

"Yo're tryin' to dig into m' past, huh?" he grunted. "Yo're a-gettin' me drunk, so yuh can put some deadwood on me, huh?"

"Archie, yo're the past-master of the Loco Lodge!"

"All right—heap me with honors, but yuh can't slicker me. Let sleepin' dogs lie—that's my motter. Well, who do yuh want to rob?"

Tellurium whispered quietly, and Archibald nodded dumbly. It was a crazy scheme, but it appealed to Archibald.

"We go to town right after supper," said Tellurium, "and don't forget to put a big handkerchief in your pocket, Archie."

"I'll be there with bells on," declared Archibald.

"You can leave the bells here—this ain't no shivaree."

Ed McLean was more than a little worried over the way things were going. That punch in the nose indicated that Jim Bailey had a mind of his own and might make trouble. And there was that hard-eyed, cold-jawed Skeeter Smith, who knew too much. McLean had no idea of giving Skeeter Smith any part of the Lazy H. If things came to a bitter showdown, he'd swear that Jim Bailey had fooled him; that McLean had accepted him at face value. Bailey had no proof otherwise. Bob Hawley, the detective, was dead, and he had McLean's only contact to secure the right man.

McLean sat at his desk that night, thinking things over. Personally, he felt secure, but he wanted more than personal security—he wanted ownership of the Lazy H. He had schemed long and hard to put over this deal. He looked at his old safe, half in the shadows from the lamp on his desk, wondering if there could be any scrap of paper in that safe that would, or could, incriminate him, in case of an investigation. He felt sure that everything dangerous had been removed, but as he looked at the safe, he felt a desire to sift things again and be sure.

He went over to the safe and twisted the dial carefully, swung the heavy door open and began taking out the papers, placing them on his desk. A sudden draught caused a paper to flutter off the desk, and a chill breeze struck the back of his neck.

SLOWLY he turned his head, realizing that someone had opened the rear door. Two masked men were standing there, one of them covering him with a six-shooter. The man growled behind his mask:

"Don't move! Keep yore hands in sight."

The other man stepped over to the desk, grasped a handful of the papers and started to put them in his pocket. In fact, he had some of them in his coat pocket, when a voice behind him said:

"Drop the papers!"

His hand came away from his pocket, dragging papers out, and he dropped them on the pile of papers atop the desk.

"Back over by the door," growled the voice again, and the first two masked men obeyed. One of them whispered;

"My gosh—another set!"

He was right, there were two more masked men behind them. McLean, white-faced, watched one of the second pair sweep up the papers and dump them into a sack.

"Is the safe empty?" asked the hold-up man.

"Yes," whispered McLean huskily.

Swiftly the two men backed away, and went outside. The first two were watching McLean narrowly. They too backed out, leaving the frightened attorney still on his knees beside the safe.

Slowly he got to his feet, walked to the rear door and looked out into the night. There was nobody in sight. He locked the door and went back to his desk, where he sat down heavily, staring at his empty safe. Every paper was gone. Suddenly he said aloud;

"What am I worried about, anyway? There was not an incriminating paper in the safe. This is a job for the sheriff."

He put on his hat, locked the door and went down to the sheriff's office. Cactus Spears was there, but McLean didn't want to talk with the deputy. He found the sheriff at the Antelope Saloon, ensconced in a draw-poker game. Also in the game was Skeeter Smith. Mc-

Lean waited until the sheriff dropped out of a pot. "Mace, can I have a word with you?" he asked.

The sheriff followed him outside, where McLean told him what happened in the office.

"Two different sets?" the sheriff said. "Ed, that sounds like you must have dreamed it. Why on earth would those four men want your papers?"

The lawyer shook his head. "Sheriff, I wish I knew," he said.

"Couldn't you identify any of the four?"

"No, I couldn't, damn 'em! Things like that confuse you."

"Well, I don't know of anythin' we can do about it, Ed. They're gone—and so are yore papers. Maybe they'll send 'em back to you."

"I suppose I'll have to wait and see," sighed McLean.

Tellurium Woods and Archibald Haas rode slowly on their way back to the Lazy H. Not much had been said since they entered Ed McLean's office. Finally Tellurium spoke.

"Archie, did you get a good look at them two?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I seen 'em good."

"Good enough to identify 'em?"

"Nope—good enough to stand where they told me to."

"Yuh know," remarked Tellurium, "it's awful funny that two other men should get an idea jist like mine. It shows I'm smart."

"Yeah," agreed Archibald, "yo're smart, Tellurium—but them two was the smartest."

"How do yuh figure that?"

"They brought a sack."

IX

THE news of the robbery at McLean's office was brought back to the ranch by Skeeter Smith, and Jim Bailey heard it next morning at breakfast. He realized that if there had been anything incriminating in that safe, it was too late to do anything about it now. And, strangely enough, Jim Bailey didn't care. He had lost all desire to help McLean. Naturally, he wanted Mary to get some of the Lazy H, but that was something beyond his control. As far as his share of the deal was concerned, he never did feel that he would ever receive it. He didn't trust McLean at all, and the longer it went, the less his trust.

Ed McLean came out to the Lazy H that afternoon. He said he was out to get a breath of fresh air, but he soon got Jim alone.

"I heard about your robbery," said Jim. "Did they get anything?"

"They took every paper out of my safe," replied McLean, "but little good

[*Turn page*]

"Yuh'll Be Just One Man Tryin' to Watch a Dozen Trails at the Same Time—and It Can't Be Done!"

THAT'S what Tex Fortune told Logan Ware—and Logan caught him up quickly. "Just one man, Tex?" he asked softly.

Tex swore. "Don't count on me."

"I am," said Ware evenly. "On you and Rainy Day and, I hope, on Packy Maroon, And Smoky, of course. The others—well, they'll jump the way they'll jump, or get whatever is coming to them according to the kind of cards they call for!"

And that's how it turned out to be on the Hat Ranch—the ranch old Hamp Rudd, now dead, had built up with gun and fist. Logan Ware was in charge now—and he had rustlers, traitors and a dozen assorted varieties of human snakes to deal with. And when old Rudd's daughter, Loren, came back with some ideas of her own, the job of keeping the Hat Ranch from breaking up became tougher than ever in WATER, GRASS AND GUNSMOKE, the smashing complete book-length Western novel by L. P. Holmes featured next issue. Look forward to a great yarn!

it will do them—I saw to that. Day after tomorrow that will is to be probated. I've talked with the judge. All you have to do is appear in court with me and answer questions. If anybody in Pinnacle City thinks that they can stop me from getting control of this ranch, they're badly mistaken."

"I can," declared Jim Bailey soberly.

"You?" gasped the lawyer. "Don't be a fool, Bailey."

Jim Bailey laughed shortly. "I'm through with it, McLean—and you better be, too."

"Yellow, eh?" sneered the lawyer.

Jim shrugged. "I'll take it on one consideration, McLean."

"What's that?"

'That as soon as I get the ownership of the Lazy H, I turn it over to Mary Deal."

"Well, what a fool you've turned out to be! Do you think for a minute that I'd—so you're stuck on the girl, eh? Well, if—"

"Turn it over to her," said Jim doggedly, "and we'll both pull out. You say I am yellow. I suppose that means, I'm afraid. I am. I believe that robbery last night was done because four men do not believe that will was on the square. My acceptance by the court won't change their minds. You know, as well as I do that the will was not on the square, McLean. Clint Haverty did not cut Mary Deal out of her share—and you know it."

McLean's eyes slitted, as he looked at Jim Haverty. If looks could kill, Jim Bailey would have died in his tracks.

"What else do you know that's funny?" asked the lawyer tensely.

"I know that when you go into court to probate that will, Jim Bailey won't be there. When I came here, I fell for your crooked deal, because I didn't know these folks. It looked like a chance for easy money. But I don't want that easy money now."

Ed McLean stared grimly into space. His plans were shattered if this foolish kid persisted in not doing his part.

"You're letting a pretty face keep you from a fortune," he said.

"We will leave the woman out of it, McLean. I'm walking out. Even if the Haverty brothers get the Lazy H—I can't help it."

"So that is your final word, eh, Bailey?"

"That is final, McLean."

"All right, you're the loser," said the lawyer and started over to get into the buggy. "I'll see you in court," he said, and drove away.

"He'll see me in court?" queried Jim to himself. "What has he got under his hat, I wonder?"

He walked up to the house and met Archibald Haas.

"How about some pistol practice, Jim?"

Jim smiled. "Are you willing to take chances?"

"Shore—if yuh want to try it. A feller never knows when he'll need a gun. It's good to be able to shoot."

"Yes, I believe you are right, Archibald; I'll get the gun. One never does know when a gun might be useful."

ARCHIBALD led the way far down a dry-wash, where even the worst shot in Arizona would not endanger lives. After an hour of instructions, Archibald threw the undamaged tin can into the brush. "Ten feet, or a hundred, yuh miss 'em all plenty far," he said.

"That last shot would have killed a man," said Jim.

"Yeah, I know—but I ducked. You ain't cut out for no gunman, Jim. You shut yore eyes, grit yore teeth, and git stiff enough to skate on. Then the gun jumps out of yore hand and I spend my val'able time, diggin' the sand out of it. Didja ever try a shotgun?"

"Would I do better with one?"

"Well, yuh couldn't do any worse."

Jim flopped disgustedly on the porch,

and tossed the gun aside. Tellurium came out, wiping his hands on his apron, grinning a little.

"Mucho boom—no hit, eh?" he remarked.

"That's right. I simply cannot shoot a six-shooter, Tellurium."

"Well, it's a good thing to find out. Mary went to town a while ago. She wondered if you'd like to go along, but you was too busy throwin' lead and I wouldn't go and get yuh—too dangerous."

"I'd have been honored to go with her," said Jim. "Sorry. When will she be back?"

"I dunno. She said she might go down and visit with Mrs. Voigt for a while; mebbe stay for supper—she didn't know. Was McLean around, checkin' up to find out who robbed him last night?"

"No, I don't believe he was," laughed Jim. "He said they did not get anything of value from his safe."

"I jist wondered," said Tellurium, and went into the house.

Jim sat there and thought it over. He knew that Tellurium and Archibald had gone to town last night. Could those two old timers have been one of the two pairs of masked men? It would be like them to do a thing like that, trying to help Mary Deal. But who were the other two, he wondered?

Mary Deal did not come home for supper, but no one was concerned. Tellurium sat up until midnight, waiting for her, but she did not come. Jim heard Tellurium moving about the main room and came out to see what was wrong. The old alarm clock on Jim's dresser showed the time to be almost half-past twelve. Tellurium was standing at a window, peering out into the night.

"What is wrong?" asked Jim. The cook turned away from the window and looked at Jim.

"Mary ain't home yet," he said, a worried note in his voice. "She wouldn't stay this late—alone—not unless she said she'd stay there all night."

"What could happen to her?" asked Jim anxiously.

Tellurium shrugged. *"Quien sabe?* Put on yore pants, kid, we're headin' for town—me and you."

Tellurium hitched up the buckboard team, and they headed for Pinnacle City. Tellurium knew where the Voigt family lived; so he hammered on the door until Mrs. Voigt came. Mary had eaten supper with them, and had left about seven o'clock. She had said that she was going home.

It was too late to seek more information; so they drove back to the ranch, hoping that Mary might be home, but she was not; so Tellurium went to the bunk-house and awakened the boys. They all gathered in the main room, where they talked it over.

"She rode Irish," said Tellurium. "He'd come home."

The boys nodded.

"No one would harm Mary," Tex Parker said.

"Maybe she fell off the horse, or was thrown," suggested Jim.

"Mary is a good rider," said Dell Howard, "and Irish never bucked in his life. Mary broke him thataway."

"All right," said Tex, "we've got to do somethin'. Tellurium, you and Jim stay here—the rest of us go to town. We'll search along the road, and check on everybody in town. Somebody must have seen her after she left Voigt's place. C'mon boys."

They hurried out, heading for the stable.

"You might as well go to bed, Jim," Tellurium said. "No use settin' up."

"This," replied Jim, "is no time to sleep."

IT WAS a long night. Dell Howard and Buck Ives came back for breakfast and to see if Mary had returned.

"We can't find any trace of her in Pinnacle City," Dell told them. "We're makin' up two posses for the search."

"I'm goin' with yuh," declared Tellurium. "I'd go crazy, not doin' anythin'. Jim can take care of the ranch."

"I'd like to go along," said Jim.

"You'd do us more good right here," said Dell.

The three of them rode away in a cloud of dust. Jim wandered around the place, not knowing what to do. Dell Howard had tossed the ranch mail on the table, and Jim glanced at it. There was a paper from Phoenix, a small mail-order catalogue, and one letter in a plain brown envelope. Jim looked at the name, a puzzled expression on his face. It was addressed to Jim Meade, care of the Lazy H, Pinnacle City, Arizona.

Slowly he opened it, wondering who would write him. Inside was a single sheet of soiled paper, on which had been writen in ink, the letters faded;

YOU STICK ON THIS DEAL AS AGREED OR SHE WON'T NEVER COME BACK.

It was unsigned, undated. Jim sat down in a chair and stared at the open doorway, the paper clutched in his hand.

"Stick to the deal, or she won't never come back," he whispered. "That must be McLean's work."

He read the note again, holding it to the light, the ink was that weak. He heard a horse walking across the yard outside. He shoved the paper into his pocket and went to the doorway. It was Irish, Mary's saddle-horse, the reins tied up. Irish nickered at him, and he went out to the animal, which seemed to be all right.

Jim tied Irish to the porch-rail and went into the house. He had no idea just what he was going to do, but he was going to do something. He put on those hated, high-heel boots, borrowed an old belt and holster, and buckled on his .41. Anything was better than sitting there at the ranch-house.

Mary's stirrup leathers were too short, but luckily, they were of the buckle-type, and he was able to lengthen them. Irish didn't seem to mind. In fact, the little bay gelding rubbed his nose against Jim's elbow.

"You came home, Irish," said Jim, "so why can't you take me to Mary?"

The horse made no audible reply. Jim remembered that he had forgotten to load the gun, so he filled the cylinder with stub-nosed .41's, replaced it in the holster, and headed down past the stable. He was going back the way he had gone, when Blondy was shot. It might be the wrong way, but it was the only way he had ever traveled on a horse. Anyway, he reasoned, with the hills full of searching riders, one was as good as another.

It seemed that Mace Brown, the sheriff, had enlisted every rider in the country, split them into three sections, and given each one a certain territory. No one had any idea of what had happened to Mary, nor where to search. It was a blind trail, but the men were all anxious for action.

Ed McLean stood grimly in his office and watched the riders sweep out of Pinnacle City. He had been forced to play his ace-in-the-hole, and he wondered how Jim Bailey had reacted. He was sure they had left Bailey at the Lazy H, because he was not worth taking along on the search. There was not a scrap of evidence to connect McLean with the disappearance of Mary Deal and if the worst came to the worst—McLean shrugged. After all, he must protect himself. The court would consider that will tomorrow, and now he was very sure that Jim Bailey would not back out of his part in the deception.

There was only one angle that worried McLean and that was the possibility that Jim Bailey never received that letter. It was an annoying thought,

and he finally decided to ride out to the Lazy H and have a few words with Bailey. He saddled his horse and rode out, only to find the ranch-house deserted. He went in and looked around. On the floor of the main room, near a table, was the opened envelope in which the note had been mailed.

McLean put the envelope in his pocket, a grin on his fat lips. No one would ever be able to identify the penciled writing on that envelope, and as far as the note was concerned, McLean was not afraid of that. After satisfying himself that no one was at the ranch, he rode back to Pinnacle City.

X

NEAR sunset Jim Bailey began to take stock of his situation. He had ridden miles, but had not seen a human being and just now he had no idea where he was. He had lost all sense of direction, but strangely enough, was not worried. The fact that darkness comes swiftly after sundown had no terrors for him.

He rode along a cow-trail, angling up around the point of a hill, and saw a group of buildings below him. He drew up, partly screened by the tall brush. The place consisted of a roughly-built ranch-house, of two or three rooms, a series of tumble-down corrals and a huge, sway-backed stable. Two loose horses browsed around the littered yard.

As Jim looked the place over, two riders came in from behind the house, traveling slowly. Suddenly one of them pointed out past the stable. A moment later the other rider reined swiftly to the right and galloped down past the corrals and drew up in the heavy brush between Jim and the ranch-house. Jim could not see him, but sensed he had concealed himself. The other rider dismounted, dropped his reins to the ground and went into the house.

The actions of the two men seemed strange to Jim Bailey. In a few minutes five riders came in past the stable and drew up at the house. He saw the man come outside, bareheaded, and talk with them. After a short conversation he went back, got his hat, climbed into his saddle, and rode away with them.

Jim felt that these five men were one of the searching parties and that this man had joined them. But why did the other one hide from them, he wondered? After a few minutes he saw the other man ride back past the corrals, dismount at the house and go inside.

Jim decided not to go down there. He had noticed there was a road leading away from the ranch, and he surmised that it would lead to Pinnacle City. The man was in there quite a while, but finally came out, carrying a sizable bundle, which he tied on the back of his saddle. The man seemed to be keeping watch of the surroundings and after he mounted his horse he kept turning his head, looking things over.

Then he turned his horse and headed back the same way they had come to the ranch. Why Jim Bailey elected to follow this man, he had no idea. He rode off the point of the hill and swung in behind the horseman who rode slowly, but in the opposite direction from Pinnacle City.

Jim Bailey kept the man in sight through a long, brushy swale, following a well-used cow-trail. It was growing darker all the time, but he could still see the man after they went out of the swale. He was bearing off across rough country, and Jim was afraid he would lose track of him. He didn't dare hurry. Objects became more indistinct, until suddenly he realized it was dark. The last he saw of the other rider, he was heading over some broken country, and holding a fairly straight line.

There was a full moon, but its effect was of little value this early in the evening. Jim stopped and tried to take

stock of his position. After looking around he had no idea which way he had come. Irish was perfectly willing to rest.

"If we go on," Jim said aloud, "we can't be more lost than we are now. Just why I followed that man I don't know, Irish. Well, he must have a destination in mind and that is what I need most right now—a destination."

SO IRISH went on, dodging brush and piles of rock, circling brushy washouts, until Jim suddenly realized that he was on the rim of a mighty canyon. Far across the canyon he could see moonlight shining on the cliffs. Somewhere a coyote lifted its voice in displeasure, and Jim's spine tickled a little. Another and still another added their voices, until they sounded like gabbling geese.

Jim turned Irish gently and started along the rim. Stunted pines and huge, gnarled manzanitas grew along the rim. The flinty rock scraped under Irish's shod hoofs. Suddenly a horse nickered ahead. The animal was tied to a manzanita snag, standing full in the moonlight. It was the horse Jim had followed.

He rode into the shadow of some small pines and dismounted. He tied Irish securely and went back to the other horse. The rider was not there, but Jim found an old trail down the sharp side of the cliff. At that, it wasn't much of a trail, but even in the moonlight he could see the fresh scrapes of boot-marks.

Jim looked the situation over carefully. Twenty feet down, the trail was in absolute darkness.

"Suppose Mary is down there," he said to himself. "Suppose they hid her down there. Why would that man go down the trail, unless he had a very urgent reason—and what could the reason be? This man hid from the posse, while the other went along. That, in itself, looked suspicious."

He looked at the moon, at the depths of the canyon, and added, half-aloud:

"While asking questions, Bailey—what in the devil are you doing up here—all alone—and lost?"

Shivering a little, he slid off the rim and started down the trail, leaning in against the bank, carefully digging his high-heels into the dirt and against the rocky projections. Jim Bailey was frightened. The light had gone now, and he had to go slowly, feeling his way. It seemed hours since he had left the rim. It was like going down a slanting ladder, feeling ahead for each rung. Something scraped against his cheek, and he stopped, groping around with his left hand. It was a rope.

It was larger than an ordinary lariat, and he was able to discover that it was tied around some sort of an old snag. Cautiously he investigated. Just below him the trail broke almost sheer. Evidently the rope was there to help men go down the impossible part of that trail. Below was only a dark mass, like a lot of houses piled on top of each other.

Jim took a deep breath, grasped the rope tightly, turned around and went down slowly, his feet seeking purchase on the side of the wall. It was hard on his hands, that rough rope, but he was making progress slowly. He had gone down about a dozen feet, when he felt a heavy tug on the rope. He thought for a moment that he had been discovered, but a continuous tugging indicated that someone was coming up the rope. Jim thought wildly of trying to go back, but it was impossible. One of his flailing legs caught around the rope, giving it one turn, and he started down fast. The rope burned his hands, but he didn't even feel it. Suddenly he crashed into somebody.

The rest of the descent was rather hazy for Jim Bailey. He lost control of the rope with his left hand, his right

was jerked loose and he went into space for a few feet, landing in sliding rubble, to bring up sharply on a smooth space, against a rock.

All he had heard from the other man was a startled curse when he had crashed into him, but he knew the other was not far away. Jim realized he had cut his cheek, because the blood was trickling into his mouth, and his hands felt as though they had been burned. Still he was sure no bones had been broken.

BUT Jim Bailey stayed put. He was in a dark corner and he was not going to move until the other man started something. His gun had stayed in his holster, and now he took it out. The feel of that gun was reassuring, even if he knew he couldn't hit anything with it.

Then he heard the other man, off to his right. He was cursing in an undertone, his rough clothes rasping against rock. Then he lifted his voice to a conversational level and said:

"Who is it? *Quien es?*"

Jim did not answer. The man cursed some more, flinging rocks into the dark spots. One barely missed Jim's head, and it made him mad. He picked up a shattered part of the rock and flung it back at the man. Judging from the response, it must have registered, but the man wasn't sure from what direction it had come.

"Come out of there, or I'll kill yuh!" rasped the man.

Jim thought he had been seen, but a moment later the man fired a shot, almost at right-angles to where Jim was hidden. The man was evidently searching out the darkest spots for his bullets. Jim hunched lower, the old .41 gripped in both hands.

Wham! The man fired again and the bullet smashed into the rocks almost directly behind Jim, who swung the muzzle of his gun, shut his eyes and yanked the trigger. The .41 blasted flame, almost jumped out of Jim's two-handed grip, and the hidden man yelped, either in pain or surprise.

"Don't tell me I hit something!" exclaimed Jim, aloud.

The man didn't say; he was cursing bitterly, and Jim heard him rasping around over the rocks. Anyway, he wasn't doing any more shooting. Jim eased his position cautiously, watching further up the rocks, where the moonlight streaked them with blue. From the sounds it seemed as though the man was trying to get away.

Jim suddenly realized that if his enemy were able to get back to that rope, and climb up to the trail, he might take the rope along. Without the rope it might be impossible ever to get back to the rim. The thought made him panicky for a moment, and he crawled out into the moonlit strip. But nothing happened.

Trying to find his way back, he almost went over the sheer edge of the cliff. Peering down, he could see, possibly a hundred feet below, to where the moonlight streaked the rocks. He edged his way back and a loose rock, the size of a football, crashed beside him. Several pieces banged into him, but not against his head. Quickly he slid into the heavy shadow again, thankful to be alive, but realizing that the other man was above him now.

Jim worked cautiously now. He could hear the man once in a while, but was unable to locate him exactly. Jim suddenly realized how tired he was. His face was swollen, his hands swollen too, and he had bruises too numerous to mention. He found loose rock, which gave under his knees as he crawled carefully upward. He remembered that he had landed in loose rock and dirt. Perhaps this was the place.

Above him he could hear the rasp and scrape of what sounded like someone sliding on rock. He stood up, and some-

thing brushed his arm. It was the rope again. He grabbed for it, but it was yanked out of his hands. The man had reached the trail and taken the rope.

In sudden desperation Jim braced against the wall, cocked his gun, gripped it in both hands and shot almost straight up. There was no target, nothing to shoot at. He jerked back, losing his footing for the moment, and a fraction of a second later a heavy object crashed into him, and his consciousness went out in a shower of shooting stars.

XI

HE HAD no idea how long he was unconscious, except that the angle of the moonlight had changed. He sat up, trying to remember where he was. It was very confusing for a while, until memory came back. There was a cut on his head, and a numb feeling in his legs, but the numbness was caused by the twisted position he had occupied for an uncertain length of time.

After a while he was able to move around, and he decided that no bones were broken. Just below him on a moonlit ledge was a bright object, which turned out to be a perfectly good six-shooter, three chambers loaded. To the right was the edge of the cliff, where he had almost fallen in the darkness. Suddenly he realized that the man had fallen from the trail, crashed into him and gone over the edge.

It was a sickening thought, realizing he had shot a man. He went slowly back on the ledge. The moonlight illuminated it now, and he stood looking at it. He remembered something about the ancient cliff dwellers, and wondered if this was one of the places where they had lived. Some of the ancient walls were still there. He crawled through a broken place and into what might have been another room of the dwelling.

Full in the moonlight, sitting against the wall, gagged and blindfolded, her arms and legs tied, sat Mary Deal. Very little of her face was visible, but Jim knew who she was. Clumsily he took away the bandages and ropes. His hands were too swollen to let him work fast or surely.

"How are you, Mary?" he asked.

But Mary wasn't able to answer, because her jaws were cramped. He could see the moonlight glitter on the tears down her cheeks, and he said, "Well, my gosh."

She was trying to rub her jaw with her hands, but her hands wouldn't work. Jim helped her, carefully massaging her jaw, until she could speak.

"I'm all right, Jim," she said huskily.

But she wasn't all right. Returning circulation is painful. Jim rubbed her hands and fingers.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"The ranch," he replied. "I know where I came from, but I do not know where I am."

"This is Destruction Canyon, Jim. The deepest in the country."

"It looks deep," he said. "Did they hurt you?"

"No—not much. What became of that man? I heard shots—"

"I shot him," said Jim simply.

"You shot him?" Her tone was incredulous.

"Accidentally—but with certain intentions," he said. "You see, he was up on the trail, trying to take the rope away; so I—I sort of shot up the rope, as you might say. He fell into the canyon. Do you know who he was, Mary?"

"No. They caught me just outside town in the dark. They blindfolded me and put a cloth in my mouth. I remember that rope. They tied it under my arms and let me down here. But how did you find me, Jim—you of all people?"

"Irish came home," he said. "They

all went hunting you and left me at the ranch; so I rode Irish. We followed that man."

"They are hunting for me?" she asked.

"Every man in the country. What is in that sack?"

Mary didn't know. Jim dumped the contents and found that it was food—canned food and some cold biscuits.

"I haven't eaten since last night," Mary said. "Maybe they were going to feed me. But, Jim, what do they think became of me?"

"They don't know, Mary—but I did. I'll show you something."

He took the letter from his pocket, spread it flat and lighted a match. The paper was bare of any marks. Jim stared at it until the match burned his fingers.

"I don't understand," Mary said.

"I do," said Jim wearily. "They used disappearing ink."

"But what was it all about?" asked Mary. "You said you knew what became of me—"

"I—I didn't know what—I only knew why, Mary. I've got to tell you. My name is Jim Bailey—not Jim Meade."

"Jim Bailey? Why—I thought you—"

"I know. Listen Mary—I'll tell you the story. I'm not a bit proud. I didn't know you might get hurt. That wasn't in the deal but I can see why it was done."

AND then Jim Bailey, hunched on part of the doorway of an ancient and departed race, told Mary Deal the whole tale, beginning in San Francisco, with Cliff De Haven and Bob Hawley, and extending up to the time he left the Lazy H ranch-house on Mary's own horse. Jim did not spare himself, he told it all.

Mary didn't interrupt h i m o n c e. When he had finished, she said:

"Jim, it is almost morning; we'd better get out of here—if we can."

"Don't you want to eat something, Mary?"

"Not now—we have to hurry—before that other man comes here."

"That's right," agreed Jim. "I can't hit a thing in the daylight."

They managed to find their way back to the rope. The light was better, and the climb did not look nearly as formidable as it did in the darkness. Mary went first, clinging to the rope, hooking her feet over the projections, until she swung up beside the old snag, out of breath, but safe. Jim's hands were in no shape to handle that rope, but he managed to get up there, ready to collapse. They rested a while, before climbing to the top.

"Your hands are bleeding, Jim! Oh, I didn't notice them before. And your face is swollen!"

"I'm all right," said Jim wearily. "I'm alive and you're alive—and that is really something."

"Something I didn't expect," said Mary quietly. "Look, Jim! The east is rosy. It will soon be full daylight."

"We better get to the top, Mary."

There was still a steep, dangerous climb, but they didn't mind it, until they reached the top, when their knees went weak, as they looked back down the cliffs. Irish was there, and so was the other man's horse.

"You better ride Irish, Jim," Mary said, "we don't know the other one."

Jim laughed weakly. "Listen, woman," he drawled, imitating Archibald and Cactus Spears, "I can ride anythin' on four laigs. Lemme at him."

The horse snorted at Jim as he started to untie him. Suddenly Mary yelled a warning and Jim whirled. A horseman was coming down through the rocks near the rim, not over fifty yards away. He saw them and jerked up quickly.

Jim Bailey had two guns now, but he drew the one he had found. The rider

fired one shot, and barked the tree to which the horse was tied, missing Jim Bailey's head by three feet.

Then Jim Bailey fired—fired with one hand—his eyes open. The rider jerked back in his saddle, the horse swung sharply and the rider dropped his gun, grabbing at the saddle horn, as he spurred his horse savagely. A moment later he was gone, racing back along the rim.

"No!" exclaimed Jim Bailey in amazement. "I can't believe it!"

"You hit him!" exclaimed Mary.

"Yeah!" breathed Jim Bailey. "You know, Mary—I was shooting at the wrong kind of targets—tin cans."

Jim had a little trouble in mounting, but he made it, and drew up the horse sharply.

"Do you know the way to Pinnacle City?" he asked.

"We are going to the ranch," she said sharply. "You must have those hands fixed up."

"We are going to Pinnacle City," he declared soberly. "I want to look at buildings—a street—people. Not only that, but I'm due in court to prove who I am. You lead the way."

"Yessir," she said soberly. "Follow me, please."

THE three groups of riders, out searching all night, were back at Pinnacle City eating breakfast, tired and discouraged. They were finishing breakfast when Tellurium and Archibald came in from the Lazy H. Tellurium shook his head sadly, in answer to their unspoken question. Archibald said wearily:

"That blamed dude ain't even there. He ain't been there all night either, 'cause no bed has been slept in."

"My gosh, have we lost him, too?" asked Cactus.

Tex Parker said, "What horse did he take?"

"None I reckon," replied Tellurium. "Ain't no saddle missing, Tex."

Ed McLean joined them and heard them discussing Jim Bailey. It was almost time for the court to open. McLean's eyes were a bit bleak, as he said to Tex Parker:

"Where would Jim Meade go, Tex?"

Tex shook his head. Skeeter Smith smiled wearily.

"You may not have a candidate for the Lazy H, McLean," he said.

McLean turned away and walked toward the frame building, which housed the court of Pinnacle City. The men looked curiously at Skeeter.

"What did yuh mean, Skeet?" Cactus asked.

"They're probatin' that Haverty will this mornin', Cactus."

Cactus nodded. The men were all too tired to care much. They stood around, waiting for the sheriff to suggest their next move.

"Boys," he finally said, "I don't know what to do next. We've covered every likely place, and—" Mace Adams stopped, staring up the street, where a lone rider had appeared. He seemed to be sitting drunkenly in his saddle, as he came slowly into town.

"That's Ace Haverty!" exclaimed Cactus. "He wasn't drunk, when he left us last night."

"This mornin'," corrected the sheriff.

Ace Haverty pulled up in front of the court-house, tried to get out of his saddle and fell off into the dirt. He staggered to his feet and headed for the door of the court house.

"That's queer," declared the sheriff. "We better find out—"

Ace had trouble, trying to open the door. The men came in behind him, and he snarled:

"Keep away from me—I'll kill yuh!"

"He's been shot!" whispered someone.

There were several men in the big court-room. The elderly judge was at his desk, and McLean was with him,

talking fast, asking the judge to postpone probating the will, while he looked for Jim Meade, who had disappeared. Then the door was flung open and Ace Haverty staggered in. His left shoulder and arm were blood-caked, his knees rubbery, as he came haltingly toward the judge's desk.

"What in the name of heaven!" gasped the judge.

Ace Haverty tried to say something, tried to hold his balance, but suddenly collapsed in front of the desk. The men were crowding in through the doorway. McLean's face was the color of wood-ashes, as he stared from Ace Haverty to the crowd.

From outside came a shrill yell.

"Here's Mary Deal and the tenderfoot!"

McLean's move was totally unexpected. He whirled, leaped to an open window, which opened on the main street, and dived through it like a trained dog going through a hoop. He landed on his hands and knees on the sidewalk, rolled into the dusty street, and landed against the legs of Jim Bailey, who had just dismounted. The horse whirled away, but Jim Bailey fell on top of the lawyer. A moment later Jim Bailey had a tight grip on McLean's two ears and was bouncing his face up and down in the dust.

Then strong arms reached through the dust cloud, lifted Jim Bailey away, picked up the choking lawyer and carried him into the court house. Jim Bailey followed them in. Mary was there, and everybody was trying to talk at once.

McLean, half-choked from the dust, pointed a shaking finger at Jim Bailey and spluttered:

"He's a liar! That man is an impostor! Arrest—"

"Shut up!" snapped the sheriff. "Stop the noise! Let's get some sense out of this. Mary, what happened to you? The rest of yuh shut up and let her tell it."

MARY told them all about it. She told them how Jim Bailey found her, fought with an unknown man on the cliff and what he told her about himself. The crowd was silent, until Tellurium came galloping through the doorway, waving a piece of paper.

"Look at this, will yuh?" he yelled. "I—I just found it! It's Clint Haverty's own writin'. It's what he told McLean to put in the will! I had it in my pocket and— Whoa, Blaze!"

"You dirty thief!" screamed the lawyer. "You held me up! You—" McLean stopped short, his eyes blinking tearfully.

"Let me see that, Mr. Woods," said the judge.

Tellurium handed it to the judge, who peered at it closely.

"This is Clinton Haverty's writing," he said. "It appears to be instructions regarding his will. It says, 'Give Tex Parker one thousand dollars, Tellurium and Archibald five hundred apiece, one dollar each to Ace and Dick Haverty. The rest of the Lazy H I wish to give to Mary Deal. This includes the ranch, stock and everything I own, including any money in the bank. That covers it. Make it up like this right away.' "

The judge looked up at the crowd and said, "It is signed by Clint Haverty, gentlemen. Mr. McLean, what do you know about this paper?"

McLean shook his head.

"Judge, the man lies," Skeeter Smith said. "He worked with Ace and Dick Haverty, robbin' the Lazy H. They robbed the stage and took registered mail, and they held up the bank and killed Mr. Estabrook!"

"I didn't!" husked McLean. "Those two ignorant fools took the mail. I told them—they tried to rob the bank and—"

"Thank you, McLean," smiled Skeeter. "I had the deadwood on yuh for alterin' the Lazy H to the Box Four H, but I had to have you tell me about the mail

robbery. I figured out the brand deal right away, and I suspected the mail robbery, but I had to wait for it to stew a while."

The judge fixed a baleful eye on Jim Bailey. "Well, young man, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Not a thing, Judge," replied Jim wearily. "I admit everything. I told McLean I would not go through with the deception; so he had Mary Deal kidnaped to force me to appear. You see, Judge, after Mary disappeared, I received a note, saying that if I did not go through with my agreement, she would never come back."

"Have you that note, sir?"

Jim Bailey smiled and drew a paper from his pocket.

"It was written in disappearing ink, Judge—here is the paper."

The judge examined the paper and placed it on his desk.

"Young man, do you admit that you are not Jim Meade?"

"I insist that I am not, Judge."

"The kid is all right, Judge," said Skeeter Smith. "He started wrong, but he's all right now. McLean saw a chance to steal the Lazy H. Haverty's eyesight was bad, so McLean shuffled the wills, and tricked Haverty into signing the one he made to suit his own needs, givin' the Lazy H to Jim Meade, instead of to Mary Deal. Yuh see, Judge, I knew all the time that this boy was not Jim Meade."

"You knew it all the time, sir? And just how did you know that this boy was not Jim Meade?"

Skeeter smiled. "Because I am Jim Meade, Judge. A few years ago I was reported killed in an explosion."

"I see. So you are Jim Meade. Well, I—isn't it rather coincidental that you should come here at this particular time, sir?"

"Not exactly, Judge," smiled Skeeter. "You see, I am a deputy U. S. Marshal, sent here to investigate that mail robbery, but I use the name of Smith, especially when I smell a rat."

MACE ADAMS snapped handcuffs on McLean who stared at them with stony eyes.

Tellurium said, "And they say the kid shot both of the Haverty boys. Seein' is believin' on my part—I saw what he didn't do to a tin can. Why don't somebody get a doctor for Ace Haverty—he ain't dead. C'mon, Jim—I'm takin' you out to the ranch, where I can fix yuh up with some horse-liniment."

Jim shook his head. "I'm sorry, Tellurium," he said, "the masquerade is over. I won't be going out to the ranch again."

Jim Bailey limped toward the doorway, going out alone. No one said anything, but they looked at Mary, who got to her feet and limped after him. They disappeared outside.

"I ain't no bettin' man," Archibald Haas said, "but I'll bet a dollar agin a bent-nail that he goes out to the Lazy H again."

Skeeter and Tex Parker stepped over to the open window, where McLean had done his high-dive. Mary and Jim were only a few feet away, facing each other.

Jim said, "But, Mary, I'm a cheat. I've lied to everybody. I'm just a no-good hound. And you—"

"I'm glad you realize it," said Mary soberly. "You said that love had to be honest—and you are honest, Jim."

"Anybody want to take m' bet?" asked Archibald.

Skeeter and Tex turned away from the window, and Skeeter said seriously:

"I don't like to ruin what looks like a good bet, boys, but keep yore bent nails in yore pockets."

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Next Issue: THE MARK OF CAIN, a Novelet by W. C. TUTTLE

BITTER ROOT BONANZA

Across the pack-saddle was a dead man

by
JOSEPH F. HOOK

Percy Pellett, wanted cashier of a looted bank, walks right into the calaboose — but won't talk!

WITH a five-hundred-dollar reward on his head, and with just about everybody in Montana on the lookout for him, you can imagine our surprise when Percy Pellett alighted from the Missoula stage at Pronghorn and headed straight for the jail.

Bart Barlow, the deputy sheriff, stared at Percy like he was seeing a ghost. By that time pretty near everybody in Pronghorn had heard the news and was crowding into the jail office and jamming the corridor clear back to the cells, standing on tiptoe and straining their ears.

Percy stood in front of the deputy's desk with long white hands resting on it. His eyes were bugged out, and his shoulders were humped like he was expecting somebody to bat him over the

head. "Where you been all this time?" the deputy asked.

"Oh, here and there," Percy told him in a thin, high-pitched voice.

Bart snatched off Percy's hat and examined the sweat band. Then he searched him, tossing the stuff on the desk—a knife, a ring of keys, a sack of Bull Durham, and four bits. Then Bart made him set down and take off his shoes and socks, but that brought nothing to light.

"What have you done with the two thousand bucks you stole from the bank?" Bart demanded grimly.

Percy replied, shaking his head sadly, "I never stole any money."

Then the Pronghorners started talking, and what they said had to do with a rope and the nearest cottonwood. But Bart put a stop to that in a hurry by slamming Percy in a cell and herding us out of the jail.

BUT he couldn't herd the thoughts out of our minds. We were all remembering a certain early spring day, with grass growing good and the cattle drifting back into the foothills, and the ranchers riding into town to buy supplies and celebrate a two-cent raise in the price of beef. Also, the prospectors were coming out of the Bitter Roots, looking like shaggy bears that had been hibernating, to buy dynamite and grub and get pie-eyed.

Then, along in the afternoon, the Missoula-Dixon stage had come pounding down the main street, with the six-horse team running like the mill tails and Neatsfoot Newman handling the lines lines like the veteran he was.

He pulled up with a flourish in front of the Buffalo House and tossed the lines to the hostler.

The stage door opened and out stepped a small gent with a pasty complexion, thin as a fence post and about thirty-five years old.

Neatsfoot yanked a couple of carpet bags out of the boot and set them on the ground while Calvin Coulter, who had just opened a much needed bank in Pronghorn, introduced him around as Percy Pellett, the new cashier. Then Calvin arranged for Percy to board and room at the Buffalo House.

All of us Pronghorners took to Percy right off the bat. In or out of the bank, he was always quiet and pleasant and saying, "Howdy, sir," or "Howdy, ma'am," to the folks in that high-pitched voice of his. And the way that feller could count money was nobody's business.

But unlike his boss, Coulter, he never took part in any of the town's social doings, no matter how much the girls made eyes at him.

One night, at a party, somebody asked Coulter about Percy. The banker said, "I virtually picked him out of the gutter in Washington state and gave him a job in my bank there, after he'd told me he'd been a cashier but had lost out because of his drinking. When I sold out my interests there, I left Percy to attend to last-minute details and then arranged for him to come here to work. They don't make 'em any smarter than Percy, but I've got to keep an eye peeled that he don't start drinking. Can't hold his liquor worth a cent."

Not long after that, "Shorty" Sharon come down out of the Bitter Roots for a grubstake. When he heard we had a bank going, he high-tailed over and hit Coulter for a loan. Presently he come snorting into the Casino, hopping mad.

"What do yuh know?" he raved. "That bean-bellied, baggy-eyed banker had the gall to tell me I wasn't a good risk! Told me, right square to me face, I hadn't never struck nothing and prob'ly never would, me being old. Wouldn't even borry me the loan of a sack of beans. Why, for two pins, I'd go back and punch him right square on the snoot!"

Some of the boys sympathized with old Shorty, and somebody passed the hat. But after the old prospector had gone out, still muttering what he'd do to Coulter for turning him down, we sort of reviewed his case. After all, Shorty didn't have nothing to back up a loan with, as Coulter had told him,

though where he'd found out about Shorty's past history we couldn't even guess.

Shorty had been prospecting the Bitter Roots longer than anybody could remember, and nobody had ever heard of him making a strike. Besides, every merchant and business man in Pronghorn had, at one time or another, grubstaked Shorty and hadn't never seen the color of a cent in return. Owning the hardware store, I'd staked him to grub and dynamite any number of times, myself.

JOE LYMAN, who runs the livery stable, said, "Seems like a hard-hearted way of doing business, when you first look at it—turning down old Shorty. But on second thought, you got to admit Coulter's right. After all, it ain't his own money he's lendin'; it's ours. And he's got to have some sort of collateral for a loan."

"You've said a heap," Chet Wilman put in. Chet runs the Casino saloon. "That's the sort of thing that puts banks in plenty of trouble—lendin' without collateral. We're sure lucky to have a gent like Coulter runnin' our bank." Everybody called it "our bank."

So that was the way things had stood till late in the summer, when, one morning, Coulter come busting into the Casino, while a bunch of us was swallering an eye-opener, yelling that he'd been robbed.

"That Percy!" he'd screamed, purple in the face. "He's skipped! Skipped with two thousand! He must've started drinking while I was attending the church social last night."

Somebody ran to fetch Bart Barlow, the deputy, while others high-tailed for their horses and rifles. Pretty soon Bart rode up at the gallop and surged into the saloon.

"When did the feller light out?" he asked Coulter.

"Early last night, I reckon," Coulter replied. "The folks at the Buffalo House said his bed hadn't been slept in. But he's left all his clothes there. Want to search 'em?"

"No," Bart snorted. "A feller who was figgering on lighting out with the bank's money ain't apt to leave anything behind that would give him away. I'm riding. So long."

Coulter yelled after him, "I'm offering a five-hundred-dollar reward for his capture!"

Bart and the posse returned to Pronghorn several days later. They hadn't seen hide nor hair of Percy Pellett, but they were hopeful since the sheriff had plastered the state with posters giving a good description of the absconding cashier. None of us believed that a bug-eyed, quiet gent like him, with a face as pale as a pillow, would escape detection for long.

Coulter was fit to be tied. He tore his hair and tore into the deputy plenty.

"You couldn't catch a bad cold. And you couldn't read sign if someone drew you a blueprint of it. All you do is make a big noise with that big mouth and draw down your salary. Guess it's up to me now to close the bank and take after Percy myself."

As time passed and no word of Pellett, Coulter kept getting nastier and nastier whenever he ran into Bart. I reckon the only reason why Bart didn't take a poke at him was because Bart savvied just how much we had appreciated Coulter's carefulness with our money and because Percy's hightailing it had sort of injured the banker's pride and reflected on his ability.

Nor did the sheriff escape criticism, even though he lived in Missoula. Some of the Pronghorners wrote him that, come the next elections, they'd currycomb him the wrong way with the ballot box, if he didn't get a wiggle on and catch Percy before he'd had time to blow in that two thousand he'd skipped with.

Anyway, summer passed and the fall frosts were nigh when we got the second shock of our lives. Come a Monday and the bank didn't open. There was a note tacked to the door saying that Coulter had gone away for a couple of days on Percy's trail. Nobody thought anything about that because

Coulter had often left town, Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and never failing to rub it into Bart that it was his failure to catch Percy that had made the trips necessary.

Tuesday went by, then Wednesday. By the time Thursday came and went, and no word from Coulter, folks were beginning to get fidgety. So we went to the jail to have a powwow with Bart.

THE deputy wrote something on a sheet of paper, then said, "Well, if you gents insist, I'll bust into the bank and take a look around, just to satisfy you everything's all right. First, though, you'll have to sign this paper, that that's what you wanted me to do. I've took enough abuse from Coulter, as it is, and I don't aim to have him come back and hear that I've been snooping around inside his old bank without your permission."

So we signed. And Bart got a crowbar and busted the door open. Everything looked okay till we stepped into the inner office where the safe was. It was wide open, and not a cent in it.

Bart got together a posse and cut out after him, hell for leather. The end of the week come and no Coulter. By then, all of us Pronghorners was fit to bite nails in two. We'd been robbed and robbed proper. We called in Inkpot Pyle, who kept books for a living, and he broke the sad news that we'd been bilked out of some fifty thousand bucks.

When the grapevine had spread that around, ranchers and cowhands came riding in with blood in their eyes. Everybody accused everybody else of being a sucker. Me, as mayor and what you might call my Chamber of Commerce, come in for the worst panning. Why hadn't we investigated this here Coulter before letting him handle our dinero? Why had we allowed him to pull the wool over our eyes, by pretending to be guarding our money, like the time he had refused to make poor old Shorty Sharon a grubstake loan? And a lot more questions like them. Some of the boys even talked about bringing suit against us and forcing us to make good the bank's losses.

Anyway, that's how matters stood in Pronghorn when Percy Pellett, the absconding cashier, calmly alighted from the stage and gave himself up.

When the sheriff got Bart's message about Percy, he caught the next stage out of Missoula for Pronghorn. He hurried to the jail, with half the town tagging along, and had Bart fetch Percy from his cell, then went after him redheaded.

"Why did you come back?" the sheriff snapped at him.

Percy, looking paler and pastier than ever, said, "I came back because my savings gave out. What's more, I got tired of doing nothing."

"You mean," the sheriff barked at him, "that you came back because you'd blowed in the two thousand bucks you stole."

"No," Percy said, shaking his head. "No, that ain't it, Sheriff. I never stole two thousand bucks. Never stole a cent."

"You're a liar!" the sheriff roared.

Percy just shrugged, though he looked plenty scared.

"What's the use me talking?" he asked. "You wouldn't believe me. Besides, what can you prove against me?"

"I'm asking the questions, not you," the sheriff thundered. "Where's Coulter?"

"How'd I know?" Percy replied. "The stage driver told me all about him. That's why I came here instead of going to the bank."

When the sheriff got through with Percy, nobody was any the wiser than before. Somebody suggested having a powwow with Judge Jed Smith. What the judge told us didn't help any.

"Sheriff, better go slow till you've caught the Coulter critter," he said. "You can hold that cashier on suspicion of robbery, but not for long. If he hollers for a lawyer, and the lawyer gets the case into the Missoula court, no jury would convict on the strength of the evidence you've got against Percy. Not only that, but he could turn right around and sue all you men for false arrest,

imprisonment and damage to character."

SO THE sheriff caught the next stage back to Missoula, and Bart returned to his jail office, and the rest of us went about our business, all hoping and praying Percy wouldn't get bright ideas till we'd caught Coulter.

But time passed and Coulter wasn't caught, and not because nobody wasn't looking for him. In fact, winter passed without any sign of him, and a tough time it was too. It would snow steady for a week, piling up a dozen feet deep in the Bitter Roots. Then a chinook would blow, softening it and causing slides galore, then repeat.

Come the spring breakup, there wasn't anybody in or around Pronghorn but what figured that his investment in the bank was lost and the slick-eared Coulter with it. The result was a backlash of revenge that had the town standing on its ear for some time.

Some of the hotheads wanted to take their spite out on Percy, by battering down the jail door and holding a lynching bee, and it was all me and the deputy could do to talk 'em out of it.

In fact, things was still smoldering like, when who should come prodding his burro into town from his Bitter Root claims but old "Shorty" Sharon, the prospector Coulter had turned down.

I spotted Shorty while he was way down the main street. But what surprised me was the number of men, women and kids following him. When the burro came closer, I saw then why it was they were following him.

Across the packsaddle was a dead man. And the corpse was Calvin Coulter's, the late Pronghorn banker.

By the time Shorty and the burro had reached the jail, just about every building in town had been emptied. People was milling around the jail, trying to shove their way in and listen to what was being said. However, every word uttered was being relayed to them outside.

"Soon as the trails dried," Shorty was telling the deputy, "I started out prospecting, figgering that mebbe them snow slides might've uncovered valuable outcroppings. I come to the foot of a bad one and saw a log cabin sticking part ways out of the snow. I axed a hole through the side, and there lay that banker hombre, stiffer'n a mine drill. Everything was upside down and all mixed up, from the slide carrying the cabin down the mountain slope and jouncing the devil out of it, and on top of all the grub and stuff was a padlocked tin box. I opened it with a pick, and when I saw it was chock full of money, I closed it. Didn't want to touch it. It's still up there."

There followed a profound silence till Bart brought Percy from the cell and asked him, "Did you hear what Shorty just said?"

"Sure," Percy replied.

"Then suppose you talk, now," Bart suggested. "If you come clean, the folks might go sort of easy with you."

Percy glanced around at us with them scared eyes, then licked his dry lips and turned back to Bart.

"I'll talk," he piped up. "I knew Coulter was going to rob the bank."

"You knew?" Bart gasped. "And you didn't warn—"

"Before I met Coulter," Percy cut in hurriedly, "I did time in Walla Walla, for stealing from a bank I was working in. When I came out I met him, through a former cell mate. I was down and out, and I told him where I'd been and why. He gave me money to go to Missoula and wait there for him."

THE deputy sheriff stopped him again.

"Just a minute," Bart asked. "How come, if you done time in Walla Walla, the prison authorities didn't recognize your name and tell us you was a parolee? The account about you skipping was in all the papers."

"Because Pellett isn't my name," Percy explained. "I'm really Paul Overshott. Coulter thought up the Percy Pellett name."

"Keep on talking," the deputy snapped.

"When Coulter showed up in Missoula

he told me he'd heard that you folks wanted somebody to start a bank here and that he was going to do it. I was to be cashier. But when he outlined his plan, I wanted no part of it. I told him I'd made one mistake and paid dearly for it. He said I couldn't back out now; that if I tried he'd tell the Washington state parole board he'd lent me money and I'd refused to pay it back and that I was going under a fake name —enough to get me tossed right back in jail."

"So you agreed to go through with it, huh?"

"What else could I do? The parole board wouldn't have believed me."

Percy glanced around again at the circle of faces, searching them for expressions of pity.

"I don't quite get it," Bart said. "Of course, Coulter's plan was to skip with the dough. That I understand. But why did you skip out first with that two thousand bucks?"

"I didn't skip, and I didn't steal two thousand bucks," Percy insisted.

Bart stared wide-eyed at Percy. "So you didn't skip, huh?" he sneered. "Then where in the devil's name was you?"

"Right under your nose, in the back room of the bank," Percy explained. "Coulter figured out that one, to draw your attention from him so that you'd be thrown off your guard and make the pulling of the final stunt a cinch."

"Hold your hosses," Bart demanded. "Something's haywire here. You claim you was hiding in the back room all the time, huh? Then how come you returned to Pronghorn on the stage?"

Percy said, "The night before Coulter cut out he smuggled me out of Pronghorn in a livery rig, and we drove to Missoula. I was to keep out of sight till he'd had time to get far away with the bank's funds."

"He told you, then, he was going to that cabin in the Bitter Roots?"

"No, he was too smart for that. He didn't trust anybody. He told me to go back to Pronghorn and give myself up. He figured that as long as he'd skipped out, you'd turn me loose for lack of evidence. Then I was to get me a job in Missoula and hang around till spring, when he'd show up with a long beard and disguised as a prospector. He'd hunt me up, then we'd leave the state, blow in what he'd stolen and work the same pitch some other place."

"And you agreed to that?"

"He had the bulge on me, didn't he?" Percy countered. "It was either agree or go back to jail. I thought about that while you had me locked up, and I figured a way to fix Coulter when you turned me loose. But you didn't turn me loose."

"How did you figure to fix him?" the deputy asked.

"But putting the law next to him, when it was time to meet him in Missoula. I was sick and tired of living with another long jail term hanging over my head. I thought that if I turned the law loose on him, the parole board would go easy on me. Well, that snowslide beat me to it. Now I'm right back where I started."

PERCY, as we'd knowed him, bowed his head and his shoulders shook. You could have heard a feather drop in that jail.

The silence lasted till Inkpot Pyle spoke up.

"Bart, when I was totaling up the bank's losses, I ran across Coulter's notebook, in which he'd kept track of his expenditures. Among the items was this cashier's wage, barely enough to pay for his board and room and a sack of Bull Durham. In a sense, this cashier lost money in the bank, same as the rest of us."

A low muttering rose from the crowd. Percy Pellet, or Paul Overshott, or whatever, hadn't raised his head all the time Inkpot had been speaking and telling us what a cheap skate Coulter had turned out to be, aside from trying to rob us blind. And while the crowd was talking it up, Judge Jed Smith elbowed his way to the desk and motioned for silence.

He said to a hushed audience, "I've just been talking with some of the boys

who would have been the heaviest losers if Coulter had got away with all that money, and we've arrived at a conclusion. I'll put it up to you, and what you say goes."

"Let's have it, Jedge," somebody shouted.

The judge went on, "We need a bank in Pronghorn, that's a cinch. As a matter of fact, we've still got one. Coulter took the money, but he couldn't take the building. Now that we've got the money back, according to what Shorty says he saw in that tin box, we've got to forget the past. We've got to open that bank again, and we got to hire someone to run it who savvies how. And there's your man," he added, pointing to the trembling, weeping cashier. "I believe he's telling the truth, boys," the judge went on. "He tried to go straight, but Coulter prevented that. Anyway, I don't imagine this Percy or Paul What's-his-name wants to see the inside of a jail again. How about it, folks?"

There followed a moment of silence, then an ear-splitting roar of approval. The pale-faced cashier glanced up at the judge in amazement. He opened his mouth to speak, but words failed him.

Just then Knute Olson, who runs the Buffalo House, yelled for silence.

"Yust a minute, folks," he hollered, "while I make a proposition. Yust a minute, please. I'm one of the heaviest inwesters in the bank. We're all forgetting old Shorty Sharon, who never struck a thing in his life till now, when he found Coulter and our dough. I propose that, from now on till Shorty strikes the big yackpot, this new bank of ours will see to it that he never wants for a grubstake. Who's with me on that?"

Again the jail house shook to the thunder of deafening approval.

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When rival railroaders wreak havoc,
cowhand Bart Grant trades his branding-iron
for a scoop-shovel and rides a locomotive
on a trail of justice and revenge!

the MAVERICK

ONWARD rushed the train, clanking, bucking, swaying dangerously.

"I can't hold 'em!"

Old Johnny Munson, 678's engineer, bawled the words as he frantically jiggled air brake and sand blowers. He threw the brake valve into running position until the air pressure built up, and then "wiped the clock!"

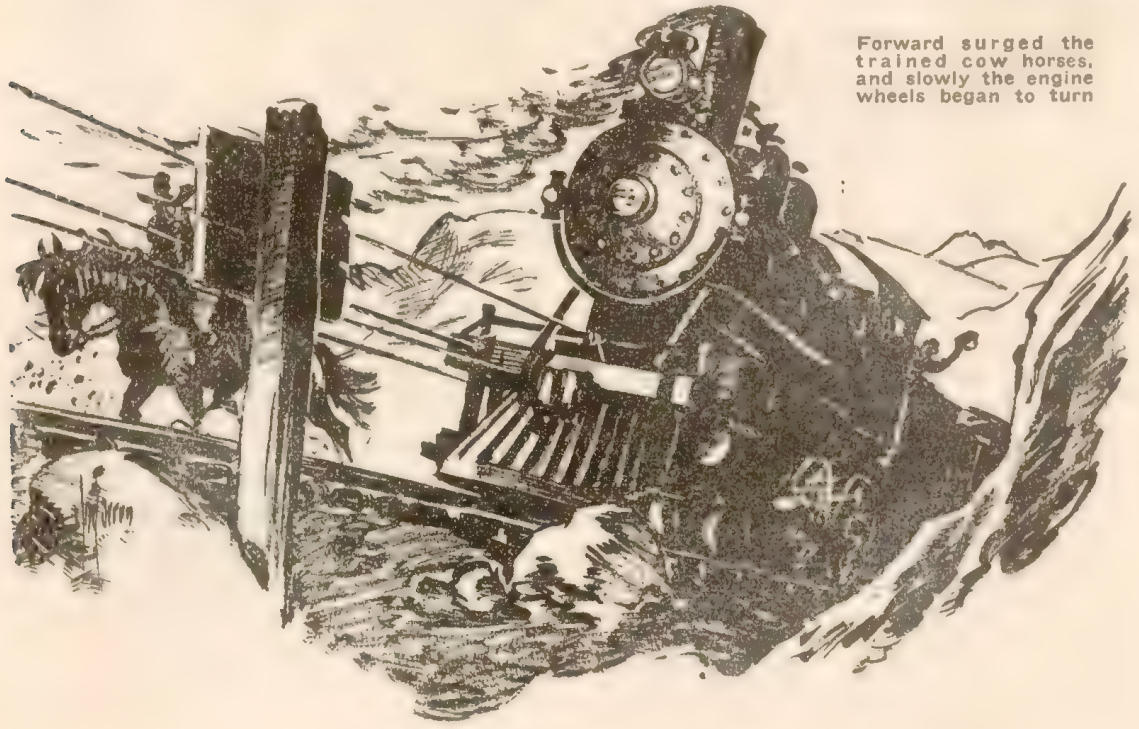
Brake shoes clanged against the wheels as the full air pressure screamed through the brake valve port. The big engine plunged and leaped like a living thing. Couplers banged and rattled. But the long train hardly slackened speed!

Over went the reverse bar! Johnny Munson jerked the throttle wide open. The huge drivers, spinning backward, ground streams of sparks from the shrieking rails. The 678 lurched wildly. Then the rocking cars, sliding on locked wheels, nudged her hard and she shot howling down the grade. Old Johnny swore a double-barreled oath.

"Get ready to leave her, you fellers!" he yelled at the fireman and head brakeman. "I can't hold 'em and if there's anything standin' by that sidin' at the bottom of the hill we're goin' to smash into it sure as blazes!"

He jerked the whistlecord down and took a turn or two around a water gauge cock. The whistle wailed and screamed a warning to the train that might be standing at the siding. Johnny swung around to face the tall young cowboy who was bumming a ride in the cab.

"Listen, kid," he bawled above the



Forward surged the trained cow horses, and slowly the engine wheels began to turn

whistle's din. "Get down on the lowest step on this side, and if I yell to you, let go all holts and hit the sand. Understand?"

Bart Grant, who had quit his job of riding for the Triple K spread the day before, nodded coolly.

"What you going to do?" he asked.

"Never mind me!" yelled Munson. "I can take care of myself. Do what I tell you!"

Grant obeyed the engineer. He slipped down the cab steps until his feet rested on the bottom one. There he hung, watching the earth fly past him. The whistle wailed. The spinning drivers howled their mad song. Old Johnny still fought to save his train.

SUDDENLY he heard the old hogger yell. He glanced ahead and saw two blazing red lights rushing toward him —the rear markers of a caboose. Grant took a deep breath and hurled himself away from the rocking engine.

Grant was not a railroad man and he didn't leave that flying locomotive in the skillful manner of a trained railroader. He just "let go all holts" and dropped. His landing was a thing of awe and wonder.

He turned three backward handsprings, spun around, threw a forward somersault. He landed on his feet, his boots skidded in the sand and he sat down with force. For a moment he remained there, watching the stars and moons and flaming suns play leapfrog across the sky.

Then his vision cleared somewhat and he stood up just in time to see the 678 hit the caboose with a crash that shook the mountains and knocked the crummy into the middle of next week. Over went the 678 on her side, steam howling from a smashed cylinder. The train began to pile up like cakes of ice in a river jam. Bart dodged a couple of boxcars and ran farther from the track. A swearing figure limping along a few yards distant he recognized as old Johnny.

"You hurt?" he shouted to the engineer.

Johnny turned, opened his mouth to reply.

Wham!

Grant knew what that was, and ducked. He ducked again as another bullet fanned his face. Thirty yards distant was a low ridge. Bright spurts were flickering along the crest of that ridge. Rifles were banging like a pack of fire crackers. Old Johnny dived for a boulder.

"Take cover, kid!" he squalled.

Grant didn't know what it was all about, but he took Munson's advice without arguing. Another boulder, slightly smaller than Johnny's, furnished him an insecure refuge.

"They shootin' at us?" he shouted to Munson.

"You danged fool!" sputtered the engineer. "Think they're out gunnin' for quail this time of night? Watch me wing me a sidewinder!"

A yard-long stream of fire shot across the rock which sheltered him. The accompanying report was like a thunderclap on a drunk.

"Good gosh!" breathed Grant. "What has he got there, a cannon?"

Bullets were knocking chips from his boulder. Grant snugged closer to the sand.

"They keep that up and they'll cut this pirootin' rock down to a pebble!" he growled. "Here's where I go into action!"

Both his Colts let go in a rippling crash, sweeping the ridge crest with a hail of lead. The spurts of fire jerked wildly as the rifle wielders ducked and dodged. Grant ejected the spent shells and reached toward his belt.

Something that looked like a shooting star sailed through the air, passed over Johnny and a splintered box car and hit the ground.

Hoourram!

Grant was knocked end over end. He came up spitting sand but still shoving cartridges into his sixes. Old Johnny cursed to high heaven.

"Them cussed galoots are throwin' dynamite at us!" he howled. "Look out, here comes another stick!"

That one hit inside the boxcar and blew planks all over the landscape. A splinter hit old Johnny in the most prominent portion of a man's anatomy who is bending over to pick up a fallen revolver. His subsequent remarks outdid all his previous efforts.

From somewhere behind the wrecked engine a couple more six-guns began to talk.

"That's the train crew of the freight ahead," shouted Johnny to Grant. "Pepper 'em, kid, we got reinforcements!"

A crashing boom sounded farther back up the hill. Grant flattened out on the sand as buckshot screeched over his head. Another boom and the buckshot came closer.

"It's Hangfoot Johnson, my conductor!" wailed Johnny Munson. "He's cross-eyed, and he's got the shakin' palsy and a six-gauge shotgun. He thinks he's aimin' at that ridge and all he's doin' is gettin' our range!"

"Hey!" yelled Grant. "There's nobody shootin' from that ridge any more!"

THE railroaders had arrived at the same conclusion. The conductor and flagman from the wrecked caboose came creeping cautiously from cover, smoking Colts in hand. "Hangfoot" Johnson, the conductor, jittered down the hill, his shotgun muzzles menacing all and sundry. There was enough moonlight to show Johnny Munson that both barrels were cocked.

"Take that old baseburner away from him, somebody!" moaned Johnny. "He's looking straight at me!"

"I ain't!" disclaimed Hangfoot indignantly. "I'm watchin' them rocks up there."

Grant was staring at the engineer's pistol. It was nearly a yard long and the muzzle looked like a nail keg with the head knocked in.

"Ain't she a wonder?" chortled Johnny, waving the ancient weapon. "A Sharps cap-and-ball. I cut my teeth on it!"

"It would be more fitten for a alligator," said Hangfoot.

Bart Grant demanded information.

"What's all this about?" he asked. "Is it a reg'lar part of the job, or somethin' special?"

Enlightenment poured in:

"Them bush-crawlin' K and G W sidewinders!" raved Johnny.

"They greased the rails so we could not hold 'em down the hill!" said Hangfoot.

"They piled crossties on the track and set 'em on fire so we'd have to stop!" added the conductor of the freight ahead.

"But why?" Bart insisted. "The K and G W is a railroad, too, ain't it?"

"Sure, it's a railroad," snorted old Johnny. "Leastwise it pretends to be one! You see, kid, it's like this:

"The K and G W and our C and P are both tryin' to be first to build into *La Mesa Encantada*—you know, that's what the Mexicans call the Enchanted Mesa country southwest of here. The C and P sort of got a head start and the K and G W is doin' everything they can to slow up. That's why they piled up this material train that's headed for the construction camps the other side of Crater. They'll swear they didn't have nothin' to do with it, but we all know a heap sight better, even if we can't prove anything."

Grant nodded. "I see, sort of like a cattle war."

"With engines for cuttin' horses and boxcars for dogies," supplied Hangfoot.

Bart and the railroaders turned at

the sound of footsteps. The 678's head brakeman hurried up and added a sobering note to the discussion.

"Hank's over on the other side the grade with a broken leg!" he panted. Hank was 678's fireman.

Johnny Munson swore luridly and turned to the conductor of the freight ahead.

"Your engine's all right, ain't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said the con. "The boys about had those ties raked off when I heard the shootin' and come back."

"Good!" said Johnny. "You highball over and tell your hogger to pull out for Crater soon as we get Hank loaded into one of those empty boxcars in your train. I'll ride to town with him. You come along, too, kid," he told Grant.

II

GRANT helped Munson strap up the injured man's leg as they rumbled toward Crater. Somebody had produced a pint of whiskey. Hank, having swallowed most of it and lighted a cigarette Grant rolled for him, was resting comparatively easy.

"I'll be laid up two or three months, though," he grunted between puffs. "Johnny, who you going to get to shovel coal for you while I'm gone?"

Old Johnny scratched his grizzled head. "Darnfino," he said. "Good tallowpots with spunk ain't so easy to come by for this run. Most everybody's goin' to shy away from it after what happened today."

An idea suddenly struck him. His eyes brightened as he turned to Bart Grant.

"Kid, I like you!" he exclaimed. "You got the makin's of a railroad man in you. Said you was out of a job right now, didn't you? Why don't you sign up for a job firin' with me? I can fix it with Rawhidin' Dave Barrington, the division superintendent. Him and me started out on this road together."

"Shucks!" objected Grant. "I'm no railroader, I'm a cowhand."

"Ain't no difference," declared Johnny. "For either one it just takes a strong back and a weak mind. I know —I used to be a cow nurse myself."

Grant grinned with a flash of white teeth. "Sounds interestin'," he admitted.

"You can make twice as much money each month ridin' a engine as you can a horse," added Hank.

"Of course, it's sort of dangerous now, with them K and G W drygulchers gunnin' for us," remarked old Johnny shrewdly.

That remark settled Grant. The grin left his lips leaving them set in a hard line. His greenish-gray eyes narrowed slightly.

"Uh-huh," he drawled, "that's right. I'd done forgot about those jiggers tryin' to send me a long trip on the hot end of a bullet. Seein' as they saw fit to include me in this fight, I guess I'd better arrange to be in on the finish."

"Fine! Shake!" Old Johnny was chuckling in his whiskers at the success of his ruse.

Two days later, on the long hill west of Crater, Bart Grant straightened his aching shoulders, wiped the sweat from his face and groaned dismally.

"Good gosh!" he exclaimed. "My backbone's tied into more knots than a sidewinder crawlin' through a cactus patch. This shovel's too big!"

Johnny Munson motioned to the head brakeman, an old hand, to come over and keep an eye on the throttle. He chuckled as he stepped onto the deck.

"You set down and cool off a bit," he told Grant. "Now watch how I handle this scoop and scatter the coal over the fire. You build up a big hump of coal just inside the firedoor, to keep the heat off you and hold your fire steady. Like this, now. . . . Catch on?"

Grant "caught on." The steely strength, the quickness of hand and eye and the keen intelligence that had made him a tophand at ranch work quickly made him master of his new job. Old Johnny chuckled in his beard and "Rawhidin' Dave" Barrington, the famous superintendent of the Mountain division, nodded approvingly one day when he rode the 678 from Gila to Crater.

"You're doing fine, son," he rumbled. "Keep it up. You've got the makin's of a fust-class fireman. That isn't the limit, either, son. There's a big future in railroading."

Grant stuck to it. There were times when, gazing across the rangeland, a sick longing would sweep over him as he watched a group of cowhands, carefree, happy, racing with the train or busy about their chores. But then he would set his jaw hard, and turn back to the heat and dust and grease of the engine cab. Bart Grant had a score to even, and he didn't lay down on a chore once he took it on. He'd be there at the finish!

THERE came a lull in the row between the rival lines. Each was too busy building railroad to find time to make trouble for the other. Winter brought enough problems of its own to prevent men from inventing new ones with which to plague their fellows. Steel fingers slashed and tore through the hills that guarded *La Mesa Encantada.* Cattlemen watched the race with interest and conjectured just when trouble would break out afresh.

"They'll cut loose when spring comes," said Cal Hinkey, who owned the Triple K on which Bart Grant had worked. Other ranchers agreed with Cal and were expectant when soft breezes began to whisper across the tender greens of the Mesa.

Bart Grant was thinking of other things that warm, wet day. Crazy Horse River was on the rampage. The mountains were sodden with water. The right-of-way was shallowly flooded in many places.

All of which gave railroaders plenty to think about. That raging river meant bridges loosened on their piers. Slides were moving down the streaming mountains. The yellow fingers of flood water were clawing ballast and earth out from under the ties. Engineer and fireman both strained their eyes to pierce the gathering shadows as their ponderous locomotive boomed through Crazy Horse Canyon. They had a short train and the head brakeman was riding in the caboose, where he could enjoy greater comfort than in the engine cab.

Grant got down to put in a fire. Johnny peered alertly across the curve and eased his throttle a bit as Blue Hole bridge came into view.

"Water's raisin' the devil 'round them piers," he shouted to Grant. "I wish we were across that pile of sticks and scrap iron!"

With a complaining rumble the 678 hit the bridge. The long structure quivered at the impact. The river beneath roared hungrily. Old Johnny closed the throttle still farther. The train slowed almost to a crawl. Half way across and the bridge was shaking alarmingly.

"They reported this bridge safe before we left Crater," the hogger grumbled, "but I'm a muskrat if she's safe now. We—look out, kid!"

Munson yelled the warning at the top of his voice. Grant felt the engine lurch wildly. There was a grinding, tearing crash as one span of the bridge gave way.

Grant dived head first through the window, spurning the ledge with his feet in a frantic effort to clear the falling wreckage. His body shot through the air, turned slowly and streaked downward. He struck the water with

a sullen plunge and vanished amid the welter of the terrific wave that rushed shoreward as engine and bridge span roared into the river.

Gasping, choking, half strangled, he broke surface. Wood and iron were still raining around him. He whirled over in the grip of the current and a moment later was dashed against a projecting ledge of stone. There was a dull snapping sound somewhere inside his chest; his breath caught sharply with the agony of it. All his will power was required to crawl up the sloping rock to safety.

For several minutes, Grant lay panting on the wet stone, the rain beating him with cold fingers. He shivered, his teeth chattering like castanets. A sudden thought brought him scrambling to his feet despite the pain of the broken rib.

"Johnny!" he yelled. "Johnny Munson!"

Only the roar of the river, gnawing its banks and surging against the partially submerged engine, answered him. He shouted again, louder than before.

Wafted on a chance gust of wind came a faint cry. Grant ran up the bank a dozen yards or so, measured the distance to the wreck with his eye and plunged into the river.

The sudden movement sent a hot flame of agony stabbing through his chest. Icy sweat mingled with the spray on his forehead. A moan seeped between his clenched teeth. But with strong strokes he swam toward the steaming engine.

HAD he not entered the water well above the wreck, he would have been swept past it by the current. As it was, his clutching hand fastened on a cab grab-iron. He wedged his feet on the cab steps and shouted.

Old Johnny's voice, a mere panting bleat, came from inside the cab. The tender was jammed against the cab, closing the gangway, but Grant managed to crawl through a window.

"Where are you, old-timer?" he called, sloshing in water almost up to his waist.

"Here, kid," came the feeble reply.

Peering through the almost total darkness, Grant saw the engineer. Munson was lying on his back across the splintered seat-box. His legs were pinned by the crushed cab. His face was but a few inches above water level.

"You hurt much?" queried Grant anxiously.

"Don't think so," gasped Johnny. "Legs are pretty bad bruised and ache like all get-out, but I don't believe anything is broke."

"That's fine," said Bart. "I'll work you free of here in a jiffy."

But he didn't. Munson was held immovable. Grant pried and tugged at the wreckage until the torture in his chest forced him to desist. As he leaned panting against the cab wall, shouts sounded from the river bank. The conductor and brakeman had come over from the caboose. Bart stuck his head out the window and yelled information.

"I figgered things were in bad shape," the conductor howled in reply. "Tim went back to flag the Limited—she ought to be right on our tail—and I told him to have them cut in on the wire and let Crater know what had happened, *pronto*. That'll start the wreck trains movin'. They'll snake Johnny out in a hurry soon as the Big Hooks get here. I'll highball back and tell 'em jest how things are."

Grant told the engineer what he had learned. Old Johnny was silent for a moment, then he said:

"Kid, the Big Hook'll never get here in time to pull me out. Look how much farther down in the water I am than I was a little while ago."

Grant grasped the significance of the statement in stunned silence. The engine was sinking deeper into the muddy

bottom, or the river was rising. In either case the engineer, unable to hold his head above the surface, would drown like a rat in a barrel.

"I hear the Limited whistlin'!" shouted the brakeman from the shore.

Grant surged to the window and in a few words explained the situation.

"You hightail back and have Early tell the wreckers to burn up the rails gettin' here," he concluded. "See that Rawhidin' Dave himself knows how things stand!"

The water was lapping against Grant's face as he drew his head back in the window, but he did not realize the significance of the fact immediately. Crossing the cab he settled himself as comfortably as possible beside old Johnny.

"Kid, get out of here!" gasped the engineer.

"Shucks, no," Bart told him. "I'm going to stay right here and, when the water gets too high for you to breathe, I'll hold your head up above it."

"Kid, get out while you can," Munson repeated. "That wrecked bridge span is layin' on top the cab and crushin' it down all the time. In a little while the windows are goin' to be squashed down so narrow you can't get out. There ain't no sense in both of us cashin' in."

Grant cast a startled glance to where the window opening showed lighter than the darkness of the cab. What had been a square was now but a narrow strip, underneath which the black water hissed and muttered. Grant drew a deep breath, swore as a sharper pain stabbed his chest, and placed his cupped hands beneath old Johnny's head. Then he lied like a Texan.

"You're right, old-timer," he said, "but I waited too long already. A six-year old kid couldn't crawl out now until the Big Hooks come and yank this mess up in the air."

Munson, who could not see the window opening, swore in despair.

III

HIGHER and higher crept the water. Grant raised Munson's head little by little, the strain on his aching arms growing greater as the minutes passed. The pain in his chest had become a steady fire. The window openings had long since flattened down to mere cracks. Ominous creakings and groanings told that the steel cab roof was succumbing to the tremendous weight bearing down on it.

From time to time the engine quivered as the pounding water ate the river bed from beneath the drivers. It seemed to Bart that it was leaning farther and farther to one side. Should it roll over, it would be curtains for him and Johnny.

From up-river came a wailing whistle note. Again and again it sounded, nearer each time.

"That's the wreck train!" Grant exulted. "They'll have us out of this quicker than a steer can switch its tail in fly time. Hear that, Johnny?"

An unintelligible mutter was his only answer. Old Johnny was delirious from pain and exhaustion.

Grant heard the wreck train screech to a stop. The derrick engine chattered as the great hook swung around and stretched its long arm over the river. Somebody pounded on the cab roof. A voice shouted.

"Munson! Grant! You still kickin'?"

Grant recognized that bull bellow. Rawhidin' Dave Barrington himself was on the job. The division super had either swum to the engine or swarmed down the cables from the derrick.

"Work fast or we won't be!" Grant shouted back. "Water's up to our necks now."

Thumps followed as more men dropped onto the cab roof. Chains rattled. The derrick engine chattered and the Big Hook creaked down. Grant heard Barrington's roaring voice:

"Hoist away!"

The derrick engine puffed measured beats. The steel cab creaked and groaned. Grant tensed to haul Johnny free the instant the pressure on his legs eased.

Crash!

"Skir-r-r-r-r!" raced the derrick engine.

Grant set his teeth hard and said nothing. That crash on the cab roof had been the broken chain falling back. He could hear Barrington swearing like a madman and bawling orders. The rattle and scrape began anew. Grant sputtered as water lapped across his mouth and sloshed up his nose. He raised himself on tiptoes and stood, quivering with strain, the sweat of agony streaming down his face as he strove to keep Johnny and himself above water.

Again the derrick engine pounded. The cab creaked. There came another crash; but this time it was the bridge span sliding off into the river. The cab suddenly ripped loose with a scream of shearing bolts. Grant jerked old Johnny free.

Up went the cab, swinging in the grip of the Big Hook. Water swirled over the boiler top, seized Grant and his unconscious burden and hurled them into the current. Over and over they rolled, sweeping downstream toward the furiously swirling rapids of Crazy Horse Canyon.

With one hand Grant held the old engineer's face above water. With the other he fought the torrent. Men were running along the banks, whirling ropes over their heads, but the current was a mill race and they were unable to catch up.

Grant's muscles, numbed by the icy water and his strained position in the cab, were limbering up. His strokes were beginning to make headway. He saw the loom of a jutting rocky point a score of yards ahead and redoubled his efforts.

THE point raced upstream to meet him. It was even with him! It was passing! Grant flung out a despairing hand, felt his fingers slip across the smooth, wet surface. He clutched madly and gripped a small knob! The water raved about him. The current caught old Johnny's limp form and swung it broadside.

The strain was too great. Grant's numbed fingers slipped, clutched, and slipped again. Just as they slid off the rock a huge hand grasped his wrist.

"Come here and help me, you snails!" roared Rawhidin' Dave Barrington.

Before his men could reach him, with a heave and lunge of his huge body, the giant superintendent had hauled Grant out of the water. He was unconscious and it took all Barrington's mighty strength to pry his fingers loose from the collar of Johnny Munson's jacket!

It was Munson who got out of the hospital first. He had suffered only from bruises and exposure. Grant, on the other hand had, in addition to his broken rib, a badly wrenched shoulder. Old Johnny was an almost daily visitor and was querulously impatient for the return of his fireman to work. He arrived one day in a high state of excitement.

"Kid, you jest gotta be out of here by the fifteenth!" he exclaimed. "Big doin's! Big doin's!"

"Yeah? How come?" Grant wanted to know.

"You know the C and P, and the K and G W have both been fightin' hard to get that mail contract through the Tonto Valley and into *La Mesa Encantada,"* Johnny said.

"Sure I know that—everybody does," Bart agreed. "What about it?"

"It's like this," the hogger explained. "The Government is going to decide the thing as they've decided lots of other cases like this. They're going to let the two roads race for it, and the one what wins out gets the business."

He hurried on before Grant could interrupt. "Rawhidin' Dave has handed me the job of pullin' the mail train from Tonto City to Cooneysville, the end of the C and P and K and G W lines up to date. That's the finish stretch and he figgers the race'll be decided on it."

"Whew!" whistled Grant. "Nearly three hundred miles! Johnny, that's a run!"

"It sure is," agreed the engineer, "and I'm going to need a tallowpot I can depend on to shovel coal over those three hundred miles and shovel it right. Kid, you just got to be up and kickin' by the fifteenth!"

Grant was "up and kickin' " a week before the fifteenth. His rib had knitted nicely and the stiffness had left his shoulder. As he climbed into the cab of the panting high-wheeler at Tonto City, midnight of the fifteenth, he felt fit for anything. Old Johnny had finished oiling around and was impatiently awaiting the conductor's signal.

"There goes the K and G W train pullin' out!" grumbled the veteran. "What are they holdin' us up for?"

"The K and G W line is fifteen miles shorter, too," Grant said. "Johnny, you're sure going to have to turn 'em over!"

A moment later Johnny got his highball from the conductor and proceeded to "turn 'em over." The switches and cross-overs of the Tonto City yards clattered beneath the 261's tall drivers. The 261 was a very small and light passenger engine, but able to pull the single mail car that made up the train at top speed.

Back and forth across the cab fireman and engineer called the signal lights:

"Green!"

"Green!"

"White!"

"White!"

"That distant signal's red, Johnny! No, she's droppin' white! The home signal's white, too—I can see it across the curve. Hit the ball, old-timer! That one marks the yard limits."

The last switch-light flickered past. The last frog rattled under the spinning drivers. Old Johnny widened his throttle and worked his reverse bar up, notch by notch, toward center. The crackling crash of the exhaust droned to a whispering purr.

The 261's siderods clanked a mad song. Her drivers were a spinning blur. The glaring beam of her headlight stabbed through the dark, silvering the rails and glittering on drops of moisture. High overhead, thunder rolled and muttered. Johnny Munson eyed the black starless sky and his forehead wrinkled anxiously. One of the terrible mountain storms was sweeping down across the Enchanted Mesa.

"Yeah, we're going to catch it any minute now," Grant called across the cab, sensing the old hogger's thought.

The storm held off until they were more than a hundred miles out of Tonto City. They had stopped at Raleigh for water and coal and were just entering Crazy Horse canyon when it broke.

"It would have to wait till it got us into this hell-hole!" wailed Johnny.

Rain in blinding sheets! Wind that howled like all the fiends of hell and tore at the flying engine in a wild endeavor to hurl it from the track! Lightning that leaped and hissed among the crags! Deafening thunder in a continuous roll! The storm gods of the Enchanted Mesa were showing what they could do.

BUT the speedy engine with her single rumbling mail car shrieked defiance at them and dared them to do their worst. Into the black night she bored like a roaring comet, her crashing exhaust out-thundering the thunder, her hissing cylinders snarling at the wind and the rain. The fine new bridge over Crazy Horse River rumbled and grunted beneath her drivers. Blue Hole tunnel swallowed her for brief minutes and

then belched her forth in a cloud of steam and billowing smoke.

"We're doin' it, kid!" howled old Johnny. "We're ahead of those K and G W sidewinders sure as blazes."

Gila, twinkling white and red and green, flashed by. Munson widened on the throttle and settled himself for the long run to Santa Rosalee, where he would take water. His face was grim, for Grant had caught a message which the Gila telegraph operator had held up to him as they whipped past. The message said that the K and G W train was running ahead of them.

The 261's safety valve lifted with a shattering roar. Grant glanced inquiringly across the cab and held up a monkey wrench. Old Johnny nodded.

Grant crept out onto the swaying running board where the howling wind threatened every instant to hurl him to death. Gripping a hand rail with numbed fingers, he screwed the safety valve down tight. He glanced at the steam gauge as he edged back into the cab: the pressure hand had already crept past the 200-pound mark, the limit of safety! The 261's boiler was groaning hollowly. Staybolts were creaking a protest against the terrific strain. Bart calmly stepped onto the deck and put in a fire. The steam pressure hand crept on. No relief could be granted by that screwed-down safety valve.

The 261 was flying! She hit the curves with a rattle and crash, careened wildly, and boomed down the straightaways. Ahead and a little to the right two bobbing red lights flashed into view.

"There's the K and G W rattler, kid!" yelled Johnny Munson. "We're catchin' up with 'em!"

Grant leaned out the gangway and stared ahead. For miles the K and G W tracks paralleled the C and P, often less than a hundred yards distant.

Nearer and nearer glowed those twin red lights. Now the 261's pilot was even with them. She closed the distance, crept up until she was nose and nose with the K and G W engine. Roaring defiance, she forged ahead.

Flame spurted from the rival locomotive's cab. A bullet screamed past Grant's head. He jerked a Colt from under his overalls and blazed away at the flashes. The 261 raced on and was quickly out of range.

"We got 'em licked!" exulted old Johnny.

"Don't be too darned sure about it," cautioned Grant. "Those horned toads will have some trumps up their sleeves, you see if they don't."

IV

AT SANTA ROSALEE the K and G W played their trumps. Old Johnny pulled into the little hamlet, slowing for water. Grant had loosened the safety valve a bit and excess pressure was roaring through the pop. He started climbing up toward the manhole on the top of the tank. There was a roaring crash, a dazzling glare of reddish flame.

Grant slid back down the coal, dodging a rain of falling splinters and bits of iron. Blinded by the red glare that had suddenly turned the night into day, he did not at first realize what had happened. He leaped to the window and glanced out.

The headlight beam was glinting on a brown flood of water that poured across the tracks. Johnny swore with maniacal fury.

"You were right, kid!" he squalled. "They played a trump, all right. They blowed the water tank up, and there ain't another one 'tween here and Cooneysville. We got about as much chance of winnin' this race as a coal-oil dog has when he's chasin' a asbestos cat through a red-hot furnace."

The conductor was on the ground, shouting profane inquiries. Grant leaned out his window.

"Climb back into your hull!" he

shouted. "We're goin' away from here.

"Pull out, Johnny," he told Munson. "Mebbe our water'll last, and we're not quittin' while we got a drop left. I'm going to screw that valve down again."

Dawn flushing the sky behind her, the 261 roared westward. The rain had ceased and the hurrying clouds were flecked with rose and gold. Old Johnny had the throttle wide open, the reverse bar almost straight-up-and-down. The 261 was groaning and complaining.

The injector kicked back with a rasping rattle. Munson tried to prime it and could not. There was no more water in the tank.

"Mighty little in the boiler, too," he told Grant as he tried the second gauge cock and got only a sputter. "Kid, we'll never do it!"

Up a long, winding grade thundered the racing engines. On the far side of this gentle sloping rise was Cooneysville. But old Johnny, watching the water vanish in the glass, felt that the town which was his goal might as well be on the other side of Arizona.

"Have to pull the fire in a minute or two," he shouted to Bart. "Blowin' her up won't get us anywhere."

"Keep her poundin' to the last second," pleaded the fireman.

Up the rise labored the tortured engine. Munson glanced at the water glass, tried the lowest gauge cock, got a hiss of steam.

"All right!" he yelled to Bart, "can't wait any longer."

Calmly as if death were not roaring at him from the belly of the burned engine, Bart Grant picked up his grate shaker and began dumping the fire onto the track. A smoking trail stretched out behind the speeding train. The steam pressure fell swiftly.

Slowly and still more slowly the great drivers turned. The short train barely crawled. With a final clank of siderods it stopped. Johnny Munson set the brakes to keep them from rolling back down the hill and swore. Far behind them, but boiling swiftly nearer, was the smoke of the K and G W engine.

Bart Grant was not watching the rival train approach. His gaze was fixed on a string of black dots that dipped and wavered across the hill slope to the west. Swift minutes passed and the dots resolved to a score of galloping horsemen. Grant watched them with narrowing eyes.

Up to the stalled train swept the troop. Guns cracked, shouts split the air. The leader pulled his foaming horse to a halt beside Grant's window and whooped like an Indian.

"Hi-yi! you old bronc buster!" he shouted. "We rode over to see you show them K and G W wideloopers your dust!"

Grant grinned, recognizing Hank Wallace, foreman of the Triple K, Grant's old outfit.

"Looks like they're going to show us their dust, Hank," he admitted. "They blew up a water tank on us and our boiler's drier than a Yaqui buck with an empty quart."

"Them rats!" wailed Hank. "We brought the Lazy V and the Slash W boys with us, too. This is the wrong way for things to turn out. Can't you do somethin', Bart?"

GRANT glanced at the hill crest so tantalizingly near, and half shook his head. Then he let out a joyous whoop.

"*I* can't do anything, Hank," he exclaimed, "but I sure as blazes believe you can! You got more'n twenty horses that are used to turnin' thousand-pound beefs flip-flops. This is a light engine, and the ground is almost level. If you can pull us over the top of this cussed hill, we can roll down the other side into Cooneysville. Get busy, you ornery leather grabber!"

The cowboys went into action. Ropes were whirled to settle over every avail-

able projection on the engine.

"Let's go!" yelled Hank Wallace. "Put your legs into it, you jugheads!"

Forward surged the trained cow horses. The tautening ropes twanged like harp strings. Old Johnny released his brakes and leaned out the window. Slowly the engine wheels began to turn, then faster and faster.

SNORTING and skittering, their hoofs slipping on the rails and stumbling over the ties, the frantic horses dragged the train to the hill crest.

A mile behind, the K and G W engine boomed upward in a cloud of smoke.

Old Johnny felt his engine dip over the crest and start rolling smoothly down the grade. He yelled a warning to the punchers.

Ropes were loosed. Those who took their dallies, cast off and let the lariats go to blazes. Those who tied hard and fast, sawed frantically with knives.

Swinging and lurching, the 261 swept down the hill. The K and G W train roared over the crest and thundered in pursuit.

Old Johnny gave a yell of dismay.

"Good gosh, kid, we ain't got no brakes! I used the last pound of air holdin' 'em on the hill!"

Over the coal went Bart. He climbed down the ladder on the rear of the tank and pounded on the front door of the mail car.

"Do what you can with the hand brakes," he told the conductor. "The rest of you fellers pitch the mail sacks out as we pass the station. We're not going to stop there."

"If there's anything standin' on the track ahead, we're going to stop for good!" squawked the con.

Around the curve and down a final straight stretch boomed the 261. The hand brakes were screeching the shoes against the wheels, but the speed barely slackened. The station flashed past and Grant saw mail sacks cascade through the open car door. Almost before they hit the ground, men seized them and hurled them into a buckboard. Dancing, half-wild broncs shot away to the post office just as the K and G W train screamed to a stop a scant hundred yards distant.

"Keno!" whooped Bart Grant. "I reckon that squares the account with those hellions! Throw lead at me, will they?"

"Yeah, we did it, kid, thanks to you!" exulted old Johnny. "And when it comes to a tough spot, there ain't nothin' like a good horse to get you off it. Hello, Dave, you old jughead! Just listen to this!"

Rawhidin' Dave Barrington, who had swarmed up the steps of the slowing engine, listened.

He shook hands with Munson, pounded him on the back. Then he turned to Bart Grant.

But Grant wasn't there, and Barrington couldn't find him. When he did encounter him, nearly an hour later, the super stared in slack-jawed astonishment.

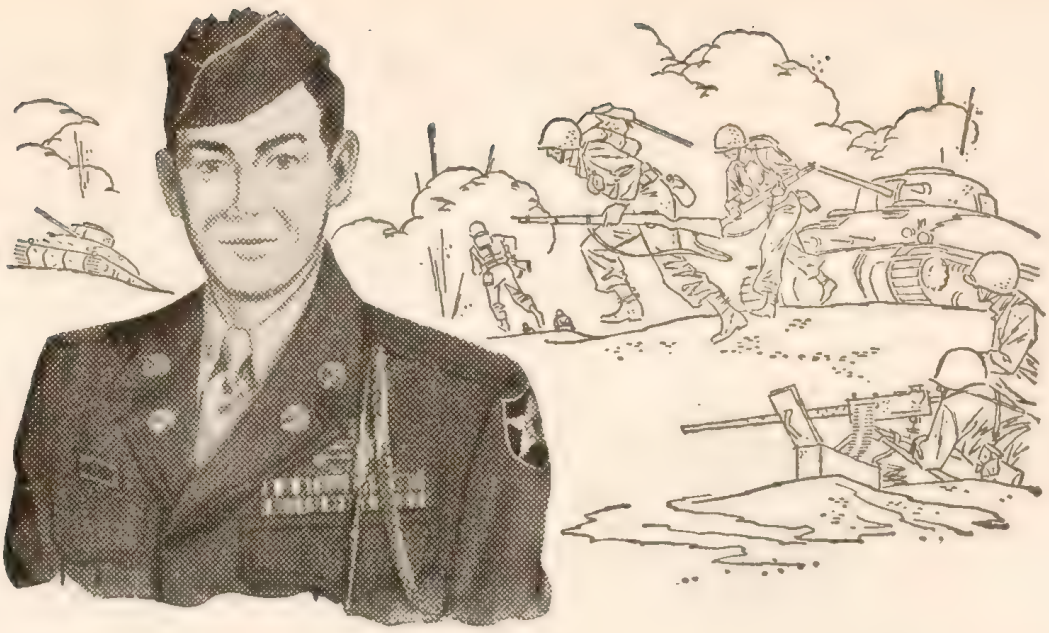
Gone were the greasy overalls and jumper and the peaked cap. Bart Grant wore a soft blue shirt, faded, scrubbed-clean overalls stuffed into scuffed high-heeled half-boots of softly tanned leather, batwing chaps, vivid handkerchief looped about his sinewy throat. A dimpled, broad-brimmed "J. B." was cocked over one eye. He forked what looked to be a first-class cutting horse.

"W-what in blazes!" demanded Barrington.

"Well, suh," said Grant, without the trace of a smile, "this railroadin' chore is sort of dull and soft and easy. I crave a mite of exercise and excitement, so I'm headin' for the Slash K to drop my loop on a job of cow herdin'. So long!"

Barrington watched him vanish in a cloud of dust.

"Well, I'll—be—darned!" sputtered the super.



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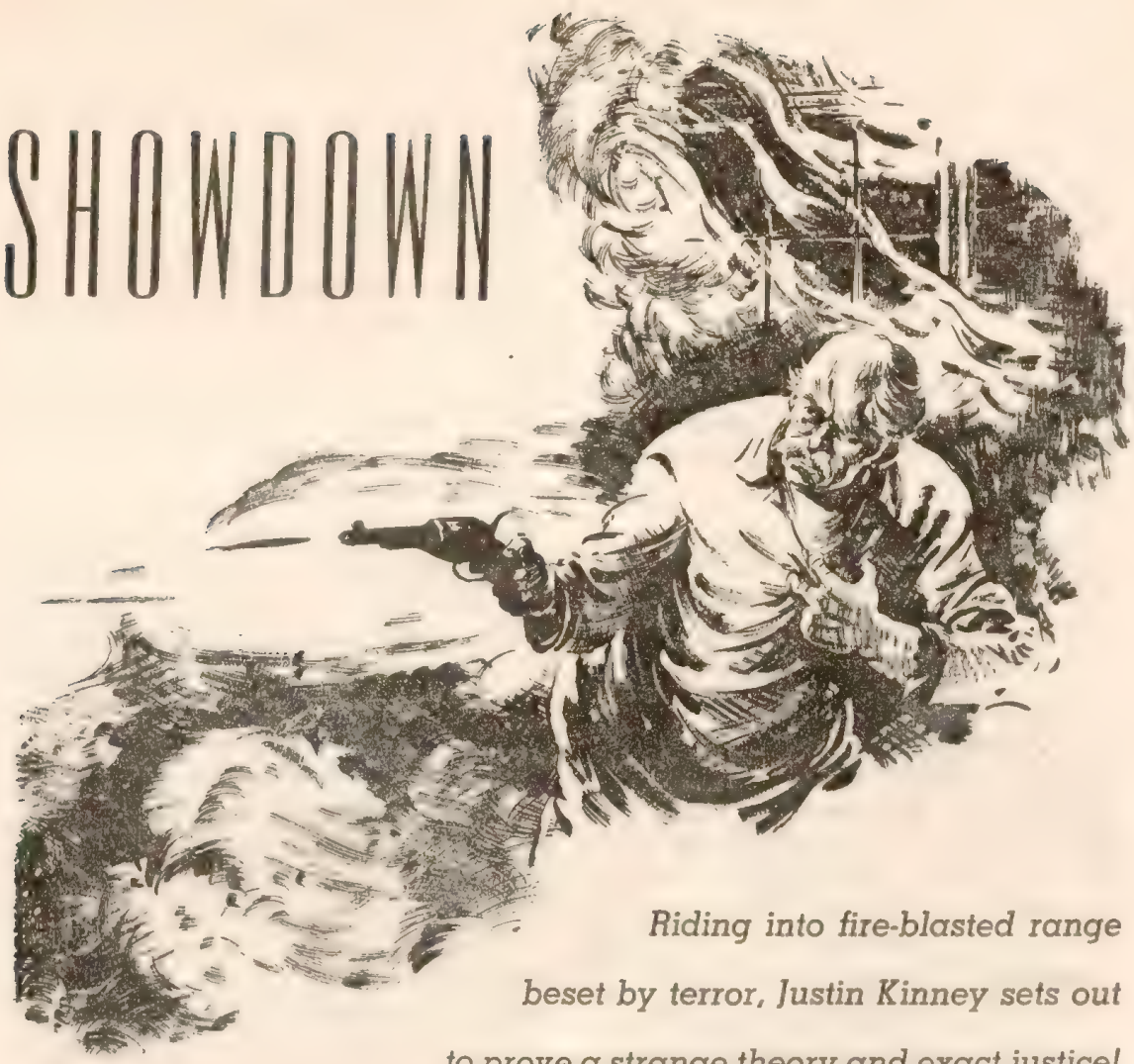
JOHN JO CARPENTER

LANTERN-LIGHT

The deafening crash of the two guns came together

SHOWDOWN



Riding into fire-blasted range beset by terror, Justin Kinney sets out to prove a strange theory and exact justice!

ALL afternoon he had ridden across the blackened, ruined mesa, his pony's feet kicking up a cloud of feathery black ash with each step. There was no heat left, for the fire had sped through the grass two days before, leaving only the sullen, dark, trackless waste of ash. The horse was stained all over with it, the rider almost as bad. There were white circles around his eyes, and another around his mouth, and each jog of the horse showed a white ring around the man's wrists.

He wore a battered Army hat, cocked sidewise. Under his denim jacket was what was left of an officer's tunic, its blue faded now, its gold buttons long since replaced with nails and twine ties. He sat his saddle with a hint of soldierly erectness, too.

Justin Kinney had left the Army a year and a half ago. He could jingle three half-dollars and two Mexican pesos together now, and he could count the cartridges left for his gun, and beyond that he had only his horse and

saddle for riches. The gun was perhaps the most distinguished-looking piece of equipment about him. Once it had been a fine, bone-handled Service-type forty-five. The side of the grip next to his leg still had the bone, but on the outside there was a piece of hand-whittled wood. Loving hands had formed it and riveted it there.

For two hours he had been riding toward the little town, dry-mouthed and hungry, anxious for a bath. It was a small town, a tiny cluster of false-front frame buildings on either side of the stage road. It vanished from his sight now and then, to reappear, vanish, and reappear again.

HE REACHED the stage road just before dark. The soot-stained pony swung willingly toward the town, breaking into an eager trot. Soon Justin could read the signs on the buildings, and count five horses tethered lonesomely at a hitch-rail, heads down.

"That'll be the saloon," he murmured, licking his lips. His youthful face suddenly lightened under the soot. "Grass fires breed thirst and short range, and short range makes short tempers. Horses been standin' there all day, whilst their riders drown their woes. Brownie, here's a tip-top place to speak softly."

Brownie tossed his head and broke into a gallop. At the edge of town there was a livery stable, with wide double doors, big enough to admit a team and wagon. There was a water trough in front of it, and alkaline water bubbling up from an artesian well. A short, red-faced man came to the double doors and leaned there, snapping his suspenders, as man and beast drank. Justin did not try to rinse off the dirt. Time for that later.

"You come a fur piece," said the liveryman, in a deep-South drawl. "How fur's the burn? See ary hay or feed for sale ary place?"

"It's burned for thirty miles south, farther than that west, I reckon," Justin said. "A long haul for feed, if there's any beyond. How's jobs around here?"

The liveryman spat. "Same as feed, cowboy," he said. "Burned out."

He turned his back and went inside. Justin saw him sit down and pick up a faded, tattered Sacramento paper. His face had a hopeless look.

"All right, set there and wait for spring!" Justin muttered. "Glad I'm not tied down. Glad I can just ride on. I wonder—how far is she burned the other way? How far to a job?"

He led his horse on down the street and tied it beside the others. All, he noticed, were stained like his own. The fire had swept through the town too fast to do any damage, or else the inhabitants had broken its grip quickly. Paint was blistered here and there, and a saloon window had cracked, and there was not a blade of grass visible anywhere. Justin could see where it had been burned off at the level of the plank sidewalk, although in the cracks the stubble stood deck-high yet.

From the saloon came no sound of merriment. It was a dead oasis in a dead town. He slapped his leg in a vain effort to beat out the clinging black filth, and stepped inside.

There were five men at the bar, all soot-stained like himself. Only the bartender was clean. All six faces turned with hostile curiosity at the sound of his feet. Then:

"Jus! Justin Kinney, you gold-braid, salute-snappin', d i s c i p l i n e-hungry, spoilt brat of a second lieutenant, you! If you ain't a sight for sore eyes!"

A big man had stepped back from the bar and was staring at him. Justin would not have known him, because of the dirt, but he knew the voice.

"Anson Deal! Sergeant Deal, the last I heard of you."

"No more. Me and the Army was both glad to part company."

"No more I'm a lieutenant. Well, well, it's a long trail that has no kink in it here and there, eh?"

They pounded each other's backs jovially, their soot-stained faces showing the first merriment the town had heard since the fire. The men at the bar watched with puzzlement. Kinney was half a head shorter than the powerful ex-sergeant, but Deal slouched and Kinney stood with such ramrod straightness that the difference was not noticeable. They were almost the same age, both in their early twenties.

"What got wrong with you and the Army?" Deal asked.

"Oh, I just got a hankering to see some of this West you're always talking about, and I give you my word the colonel did not object."

DEAL grinned and said, "Kicked out, eh? Or practically. Don't worry, I won't hold it against you. Fraternizin' with the enlisted men again, wasn't you? West Point didn't take, did it?" He turned to the crowd at the bar and dragged Justin forward. "Boy's, you heered me tell many's the time about Jus Kinney, the only second lieutenant in the Army I'd care to meet sociably. Everybody keep their hands in their pockets. It's my buy!"

"It'll have to be, Anson," Jus said, coloring. He showed his five silver coins. "There's my fortune until I find a job."

"Job!" Anson laughed harshly, but there was a twinkle of fun back of it. "I've got two-three weeks yet where I am. Most everybody else there has been let go already. We'll ride on together, if you say so. In the meantime—drink! It ain't our grass that was burned."

"It's easy for you to say that," the bartender offered, in a whining voice. "It's easy, and that's a fact, when you haven't got an investment to worry about."

"Make mine beer," said Jus, flushing again. "That's right—beer. I haven't unlearned that habit either."

They drank. Deal talked volubly, telling the others of army life, of dull weeks at the post, of duller patrols, and of patrols which suddenly flamed with brief peril and excitement. He praised Kinney so lavishly that it was embarrassing.

The talk brought back a vague feeling of regret, made Jus somehow anxious to be riding on. It was good to see Deal again; he had always liked the big sergeant with the loud voice and rollicking, happy-go-lucky recklessness. But it also made him restless again, reminding him of the thing he had sought so fruitlessly in the Army, and with even less success out of it. What did he search for? He could not put a name to it yet.

A horse stopped outside. A saddle squeaked, and they turned to see the door open again. It was a big man who came in, one almost as powerful-looking as Deal. Like the rest of them, he was soot-stained and filthy. He came toward them, tearing open the knot in his scarf with thick, impatient fingers. His checked shirt showed clean under it.

"Whisky!" he said, thickly.

Jus Kinney noticed the man's nervousness and bad temper, and turned his back. When a man wanted to be left alone with his drink—well, he had a right to be left alone.

Anson Deal stepped around and touched the big man on the shoulder. Seen from behind, they were as alike as two peas in a pod, but their faces in the bar were startlingly in contrast. The newcomer had a heavy, beefy face, blinking eyes, a short, hard mouth.

"Blackie, I want you to meet an old friend of mine—" Anson began.

Somehow, Jus knew it was coming,

even before the man called Blackie turned. He wished he could have warned Anson. He did not want to be the cause or focus of any unpleasantness. With sudden sharpness, he wanted only to ride out of this burned-out town and never come back.

Blackie whirled violently and threw off Anson's arm.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" he growled. The bartender set out his drink and stepped back quickly, wiping his hands on his apron. Blackie tossed off his whisky, set the glass down, and looked sullenly at Anson. "If he's a friend of yours," he went on, deliberately, "he's no friend of mine."

Justin Kinney touched Anson on the sleeve. Anson shook off his touch as Blackie had shaken off his own, and said, out of the corner of mouth:

"Never mind, Jus; he needs a lesson in manners on general principle. Blackie, I'm tellin' you again, I want you to shake hands with an old friend of mine—and by the Eternal, you better shake!"

Kinney stepped swiftly between them, pushing them apart. His voice rang with the old crispness of a commissioned officer. He used the trick deliberately.

"Deal! Keep your place! I shake hands with nobody under duress." He turned to the man called Blackie and looked him in the eye. "I have taken no offense, sir. I respect your desire for privacy. Forget it."

IT ALMOST worked. Deal instinctively stepped back and came to attention, but the other big man had not had his training in obedience. Jus saw his mistake, too late. Blackie lunged forward from the bar, clutching and clawing with both hands, his small eyes full of resentment.

Jus dropped back a step, shifted to get his left out, and moved in between Blackie's arms, leaning against the man's huge chest while he pounded fist after fist into the midriff. He felt the big arms lock around him and compress agonizingly, but he kept on beating against Blackie's stomach, and then, contentedly, he felt the big man relax. Blackie threw back his head, dropped his arms, and stepped back, panting and choking for breath.

Jus measured him carefully and sent over a short, accurate right. Blackie turned his head slightly to avoid it. Jus felt his knuckles split, but he caught the big jaw just under the ear. Blackie went down on his face and lay there, and Jus skipped back, facing the bar and squinting and rubbing his sore hand.

"I had to do it," he said. "Man my size can't end a fight when he's got the upper hand, because if it starts again he might not have another chance."

They stared at him, mouths open. Then Deal's stained face widened in one of his famous lightning grins.

"Blackie," he said, with a sweeping gesture toward the fallen man, "I want you to meet an old friend of mine, Justin Kinney. Jus, this is Blackie Crawford. Lord, Lord, Jus—I'd plumb forgot how you can handle them there patty-cakes of yours!"

Blackie stirred and rolled over, moaning. The dazed, bestial unknowingness went out of his eyes swiftly. He locked glances with Jus, and Jus saw the rage come back, and this time there was shame in it. He had whipped big men before. He knew how it galled them, to be knocked down by a smaller man. He pitied Blackie, and again he felt a longing to be back on his pony and heading out of town.

Blackie whirled over suddenly and kicked out. His foot caught Jus on the ankle, tripping him, and his big hand clawed at the gun at his side. Jus went down on his right arm and kept rolling until he could get his hand on his own gun.

Anson Deal sprang at Blackie, shouting, "No you don't!" in a loud frightened voice. He kicked at the gun-hand and missed, and Blackie, still on his back, swiveled around toward Anson. Anson kicked again, grazing Blackie's big arm just as the gun roared. The slug tore into a rafter with a shock that rattled the windows, and then Anson was down on top of Blackie, wrenching the man's gun-arm back.

Blackie screamed and dropped the gun, and then reached for it with his left hand. Anson grabbed him by the hair and began pounding his head on the floor. Blackie grew limp. Anson stood up, weaving on his feet and swearing under his breath. All the fun and deviltry had gone out of his face. He looked over at Jus, who was just getting up.

"I catch on, now," he panted. "Funny Blackie would take such offense, I thought. I know—he's been canned from his own job. Old Porter Strickland sent him on his way. Jus, let's you and me mosey on." He pitched Blackie's gun to the bartender, who caught it awkwardly. "Give it to him tomorrow, if he's sober. And boys, you know I didn't have anything to do with him losing his job. I wouldn't work for the old devil for a deed to the Territory."

The five men at the bar looked down uneasily at Blackie. Then they turned back to the bar.

II

THE two men paused on the sidewalk outside, and looked at each other. A buckboard came rattling down the stage road, drawn by a handsome gray team. On the seat sat a humped old man, wrapped about in a blanket, Indian fashion. He looked neither to the right nor left, but sped on down the street.

"Speak of the devil," said Anson. "There goes old Porter Strickland. Crippled—hurt in a fight with a cattle buyer two-three years ago. He's prob'ly the richest man in the Territory. Blackie worked for him. I couldn't, and Jus, I was just funnin' when I used to tease Blackie I was goin' after his job.

"You see, a man's got to be a slave to work for Port. He's got to be lower'n the dog that crawls under the porch. He's got to tote old Port around, and put him to bed, and get him up, and take him to meals. Port's got his place leased out, and he's moved to town now. He buys and sells cattle."

He pointed a long forefinger at Jus, and the angry look on his face grew angrier.

"And, Jus, this fire's right to his likin'. It will ruin a hundred men by takin' their fall feed, but it'll make Porter Strickland a fortune. He's got the cash to buy, and he'll buy at his own price, and he'll sell at his own price in trainload lots. Another reason I couldn't work for him, Jus. Me, I don't pick my neighbors' bones. Comes something like this fire—well, me, I just ride on."

"Let's ride, then," said Jus, "or I'll ride it alone. I don't like your town, Anson. I'll not let the sun rise on me here."

The door of the saloon flung open and Blackie Crawford staggered out, his hand locked over his empty holster. He had not even tried to get his gun back from the bartender, but had swallowed his shame. His eyes were bloodshot and his clothing disarranged, but otherwise he showed no effects of his beating.

He stood there a moment, leaning against the wall and reeling slightly. Then he gathered himself together and walked over to Jus and said:

"Mind you, don't let me see you around town again. You had your fun. Next time it's my turn. Mind!"

He walked away. Anson shook his head.

"It'll be his ruination," he murmured. "He ain't too bright. He let old Port

take him in. Pshaw, Jus! You wouldn't believe it, but old Port never paid him but fifteen dollars a month. Fifteen a month, for the kind of a dog's life you and me wouldn't stoop to for a hatful of gold eagles. Old Port, he tells Blackie he'll will everything to him, and Blackie believes him. Port shows him the will, and the rest of us can't make Blackie believe that Port will use him until he's through with him, and then tear the will up. That's the kind of an old skinflint he is, Jus."

The gray team reappeared suddenly, coming toward them. It veered with equal suddenness and turned smartly into the livery stable. The old man on the seat looked somehow lonely and pitiful. Jus looked the other way, and saw Blackie Crawford shambling along with his arms dragging at his side, swinging loosely.

He grinned. "How long before you're through with your job, Anson?"

"Two weeks—or two minutes," said Anson. "Makes me no never-mind. He—where you going?"

"Meet you here in two weeks, and we'll ride," said Jus. "Seems I was told not to let the sun rise on me here. I don't think I've ever been told that before. I guess I'll try for that job with Strickland."

"Hey!" Anson said, in alarm, striding along to argue. "You can't stand that kind of a life, Jus. He's worse'n any colonel ever could be, son. You'd be just a dog—a slave. And Blackie ain't to be fooled with. You won't get to him with your fists next time."

Jus patted the gun and said, "I can take care of myself, Anson, thanks just the same. See you two weeks from tonight, right here."

Anson shrugged and turned back.

"I don't want to meet that old devil," he complained. "Porter and me never did get along. Well, hope you like your job, boy."

JUS turned in the livery stable. The short, red-faced proprietor was nervously tying the gray team.

"Hurry up, Jim, you fool! I don't want to sit here all night. You got to get somebody to pack me over to the house. I fired that worthless Crawford. I don't want ever to lay eyes on him again."

"Yes, Mr. Strickland," the liveryman said. "You bet, Mr. Strickland!"

Strickland had been a powerful man at one time—indeed, he still had the frame for it, with wide shoulders, long arms, and a long, tapering torso. He had big, craggy features under a shock of snowy hair, and bushy eyebrows that met over a hawk nose. A proud man—yes, a vain man, one that hates being crippled as badly as Blackie Crawford hates being whipped, Jus Kinney thought. He would not be easy to work for, with the twin worms of money-avarice and that hatred in him.

Jim Welsh cried out and his red face showed alarm as Jus stepped up and took hold of Strickland's arm. "Here we go!" he said, calmly but confidently, and ran his arm under Strickland's legs. He had the old man in his arms before Strickland knew what had happened.

"Now, where do you live?"

Strickland flushed angrily, and his head went back. He began swearing. He was a heavyweight, but Jus waited patiently for a few moments, and then shifted himself suddenly. Strickland threw his arms around Jus's neck involuntarily. Jus grinned.

"Put me down!" the old man grated. "Set me back up there or I'll have you horsewhipped out of town."

"No you won't," said Jus. "I'm an Army man, and I don't horsewhip worth a darn. I'm going to work for you, Mr. Strickland. Name—Justin Kinney. Age—twenty-three. Accomplishments—I can handle a horse, play a little on the harmonica, and I had consider-

able mathematics in my engineering course at West Point. It didn't take very well, but I still get four every time I add two and two. Now, where do you live?"

Strickland glared at him. He turned to look for the liveryman, but Jim Welsh had already vanished, slipping away to safety while Jus talked. Strickland turned back.

"Ordinarily," he said, "I have my man drive me home, and then bring the team back. I just fired the man. You tote me home, young feller, and there's a dime in it for you. A dime—that's all! I don't want no renegade soldiers workin' for me. Take me thataway, the big yeller house back of town."

Jus carried him across blackened town lots to the big house. It had been almost a mansion once, but it had been allowed to run down lately, either through neglect or stinginess. As they approached the front door, a man came around the side of the house. He ran to open the door for them.

"Got your feedin' done, Clem?" Strickland snarled at him.

"Purt' near, Mr. Strickland," Clem said. "I'll be through in no time."

He was a typical cowtown handy-man, Jus saw, one of those worthless individuals who eke out an existence doing odd jobs. He bowed as he opened the door, bowed as he closed it, and bowed himself away afterward.

The inside of the house was even more littered than the outside. Whatever else could be said for Blackie Crawford, he was not much of a housekeeper, if that was part of his work too. Jus felt his flesh crawl. Whatever else he had learned in the Army, it had taught him cleanliness.

He was secretly pleased when Strickland said nothing further about the dime. He pointed to a huge, high-backed, leather chair, on casters.

"Set me there," he said. "Bought that from the old courthouse. Don't see no need for one of them new-fangled wheel chairs. It's got wheels, ain't it? And they'll do in the house. Outside I need to be packed around anyway."

He shot a bitter, searching glance at Jus from under his shaggy brows.

"Army man, hey? Know anything about cows?"

"A little," Jus admitted.

"Wheel me into the kitchen. Thataway."

RELUCTANTLY Jus got behind the big chair and pushed it to the kitchen door. He looked out over Strickland's shoulder. The slope back of the house was littered with shabby buildings, haphazard corrals. The handy-man, Clem, was forking hay over the fence to a dozen lean steers.

"Pens are empty now. I shipped last week. I drive down to railhead every two-three weeks. Got a couple of hundred head comin' in tomorry—bought 'em today from a burned-out feller. The fool! Didn't have no fireguards round his haystacks, lost nigh onto three hundred tons. That's the kind of business I do, soldier. What use would you be to me?"

"Fire never sneaked up on me," said Jus. "I won't touch a pitchfork like Clem, there, and if I work for you, I'll police up this hogpen a little, and no doubt you'll miss some of the dirt. But if you catch me napping, I give you license to hit below the belt."

Strickland studied him coldly a moment. Then he flicked one of his big hands toward the pen of steers.

"That red one there with the white dewlap—how much do you make him?"

"Oh, say nine hundred and twenty pounds," Jus said instantly. "No, he's big-boned and deep chested. Make it nine thirty-five to nine forty-five."

Strickland snorted.

"What use would you be to me?" he repeated. "The weight of a critter is

money in your hand or money out of your pocket, depending on your eye. Now that one there I bought for a little over a thousand pounds."

"Then you cheated yourself."

Strickland reddened and leaned through the window to shout.

"Clem! Cut that one with the white dewlap out and run him onto the scales."

They waited while the handy-man hurried to weigh the steer. He balanced the beam carefully.

"Nine forty, Mr. Strickland," he called.

Strickland settled back in his chair. "You'll have trouble with the man I had here," he said. "He's big. He's mean. He hated to lose this job."

"I have already met him."

Strickland paused a moment. "Fight?"

"A little," Jus admitted.

"Whip him?"

"I knocked him out. He's not a quitter."

"No," said Strickland, softly, "Blackie ain't no quitter. Well, soldier, if you think you'll like owning this place some day, I'll try you. I'll give you a two weeks' trial—yes, sir—and if you're the man I want, I'll change my will in your favor."

Jus came around and faced the old man.

"Look, Mr. Strickland," he said, "I don't work that way. I don't want your property, and I don't intend to stay here any longer than it takes me to get a little stake. I can ride over the horizon, and in two days have a winter job that pays twenty dollars a month. The work I'll do for you is worth fifty. That's my price."

Strickland snorted. "Fifteen!"

"Fifty, sir."

"Fifteen, and everything I own when I'm gone. I've got neither relatives nor friends. I make money because I enjoy making money. I don't give a hang what happens to it when I'm gone. It's fifteen or nothing."

"Fifty!"

"Fifteen," said the old man, adding, "—and ten percent of the profits. I'll throw that in, soldier. It's a long time since I had my hands on a critter, and I've lost the feel. And when you lose the feel, you lose the eye. I cleaned up eleven hundred dollars last month. That's a hundred and ten dollars for you, plus fifteen is a hundred and a quarter. And I'll still change my will, soldier."

HE PUT his hand on Jus's arm, and it was astonishingly strong and steady.

"Mebbe you're the man I need," he said, in a softer voice. "Mebbe you're exactly what I been lookin' for. That Blackie wasn't no good. You watch, I'll do the right thing by you."

Up to now, Jus had felt a strong sympathy for the old man. He remembered a huge tree he had cut down once, and how wasted its strength looked, fallen. He remembered a bull buffalo his troop had shot for meat, and he remembered an Apache sub-chieftain, and how he looked as he died from a bullet through his stomach. Tree, buffalo and Apache had all been strong—the last of their kind. Up to now, old Porter Strickland had given him the same feeling.

But the sudden change of heart did not quite ring true. He thought he heard the clink of coin beyond it. Instinct warned him to beware of trickery. He knew he should hold out for fifty dollars, and that if he held out for it he would get it. The ten percent would be harder to collect.

Then he thought of Anson Deal, and his eagerness to be away from this black, ugly, burned-out country came over him afresh. Two weeks at fifteen a month would give him six or seven dollars, anyway. Enough to see him on

to another job somewhere else. And maybe, with Anson, he could somehow, some day find the thing he was looking for.

"All right," he said. "You win. Fifteen it is."

Strickland suppressed a smile of triumph.

"Wheel me back to the front bedroom. That's where I sleep, and it's my office, too. Your room is the back one. I got a cowbell rigged up on a rope to jangle you out when I need you. After supper's over, you can go out until ten o'clock. But you got to be back here by ten-fifteen."

Again he felt like rebelling; but then he remembered an old saying of Anson Deal's—"A half-hour for lunch is plenty if you take an hour." Rules were made to be broken. Ten-fifteen taps? Jus grinned.

The front bedroom was a litter of junk, the bed merely a blanket-littered cot. A roll-top desk occupied one corner. Strickland motioned toward it, and Jus wheeled him up to it. Strickland reached into the waistband of his trousers and pulled out a forty-five revolver, which he put in the desk without turning the key.

"Hardly expected to see you carrying a gun," Jus offered.

"What you expect is none of my business, and what I do is none of yours," Strickland snarled. "Go fix us some supper. I like fried eggs and fried potatoes. Clem puts the day's gatherin' of eggs on the kitchen table. I'll jangle the cowbell when I'm ready for mine."

"I'll bring it when I'm ready," Jus said serenely, "but you go right ahead and jangle that bell, if you like the sound. It won't bother me!"

Their eyes locked again, and he wondered if Strickland would force the issue. He did not, but neither did he give up. He pointed to Jus's gun.

"We usually hang up our arms in a white man's country, soldier."

"Everybody I seen around here is pretty smudged-up," said Jus. "No thanks, I'll wear mine."

"I notice the bone handle's gone. Careless about your things?"

"A man shot that off," said Jus. "I couldn't help it. I give you my word he was the careless one, it turned out. Now sir, if you're comfortable here I'm going to run back and get my horse and put him up in your barn."

"What about supper?"

"A man should take care of his beasts first. When your horse has eaten, then you eat. Work yourself up an appetite, Mr. Strickland. If it makes you feel any better, jangle that bell!"

Strickland was still sputtering when he went out, but it had ceased to be funny. Jus had been on his new job less than an hour, but already his patience was wearing thin. Strickland's rudeness and bad humor were not the ordinary unhappiness of a cripple. No, there was something more, something that not even his penny-pinching greed could explain.

"Wish I could talk to Blackie Crawford," Jus sighed, "but I expect that's going to be impossible."

III

JUS deliberately violated Strickland's curfew, that night, staying out until almost one o'clock in the morning. He was glad he did, because he got into a poker game in the saloon and won twenty-eight dollars. It gave him a feeling of independence, to be able to clink five gold pieces together in a handful of silver.

Anson walked part of the way back to Strickland's house with Jus, leading his horse. It was a wild, windy night, with clouds scudding over a full moon, letting fugitive patches of eerie light sweep over the spooky, black ground.

"For two cents more, I'd get my horse out of the old devil's barn, and head west," Jus said, as they stopped.

Anson swung up on his horse. His rollicking laughter came through the dark.

"Stick it out, Jus," he advised. "I don't think anything like this has happened to Port since he got hurt. It's good for his soul, to rub up against someone that's nastier than him."

"How did he get hurt?" Jus wondered.

"A quarrel over money," Anson said. "Port and a buyer for the Mexican army were both bidding on a bunch of steers. The Mexican didn't care what he had to pay, and Port did. Mexican bid 'em up higher than Port could pay and still make anything, and old Port got sore. Called the Mexican a dirty name—and Jus, you can't talk to those high-bred Mexicans that way.

"Well, they had a fight, and old Port figgered the Mexican would be another fizzle with his fists. But he wasn't! Jus, that little devil stood right up to old Port and whipped him—whipped him good!

"But Port kept coming back for more. They fought in the livery stable there, and I guess Port got knocked down two-three times, and came back for more two-three times. Last time the Mexican knocked him down, Port fell with the small of his back across a manger. When he came to, he couldn't move his legs. He's been paralyzed ever since. Lost the beefs—lost the fight—lost his legs."

"I'd like to shake hands with that Mexican," said Jus. "A stranger in a strange land, yet he had sand enough to stand up to the town's rich man and whip him on his own grounds."

Again, Anson's laugh.

"Where he went, there's no handshakin'. He was killed that night—shot in the back not three hours after old Port was paralyzed. Blackie Crawford found him layin' out behind the saloon. At first they thought it was Blackie, but he drug up witnesses. It couldn't have been old Port, because he was layin' up there at his house with both legs paralyzed, and some doubt he'd live at all. Personally, my candidate for murder is still Blackie. Even then, he was tryin' to curry favor with old Port."

Anson turned his restless horse. "See you in two weeks," he called. "Give it to old Port hot and heavy. Most men have a streak of rattlesnake somewhere in 'em, but old Port works at it. So long!"

The moon came out then, and Jus saw the brawny ex-sergeant of cavalry pounding away toward the stage road, leaning low over his horse and riding hard. He had been the best horseman in a troop of good horsemen, but too independent and light-hearted to be a good soldier.

I wish I fitted in this world just half as well as he does, Jus thought. He wasn't happy in the Army, but he is happy out of it. Me, I'm not satisfied in or out. So long, Anson!

Clem, the handy-man, was waiting for him by the front gate.

"Psst, Mr. Kinney! I left the back door unlocked so you could slip in without Mr. Strickland knowin'. You won't tell on me, will you? I just wanted to save everybody a big row tomorrow."

"Thanks, Clem, but I'll go in the front way," said Jus.

"Oh, gosh, there's goin' to be trouble!" Clem moaned.

HE SCUTTLED away as fast as he could run. Jus went up and tried the front door. It was locked. He hammered on it mightily.

"Who's there?" came old Strickland's snarl, from inside.

Jus identified himself, adding, "The back door's unlocked, I hear, but I'm a

front-door man, Mr. Strickland. Let me in!"

"Beat it!" Strickland snapped. "You know the rules. No drunken saddle-bum can come stumblin' in here after ten o'clock."

"Suit yourself," Jus said. "If you hear anything out back, it's just me getting my horse out. Good-by, Mr. Strickland."

"Wait a minute!"

There was an odd scraping sound inside, and then the latch was pulled, letting the door swing open. Jus stepped inside. A complicated pulley arrangement had been strung up so Strickland could operate the latch by a string, from his room. Jus closed the door after him and adjusted the string again. Then he went into Strickland's bedroom, clinking his winnings in his hand.

"Had a good night, Mr. Strickland. Won myself some mad-money, so I can travel in style if I get mad at you. I expect to be in bed before ten o'clock most nights after this, because I don't want to risk losing my stake. But if I take a notion to stay out later—why, Mr. Strickland, I guess you'll have to let me in again."

Strickland was sitting up in bed, the blankets pulled over his useless legs. Near at hand lay his loaded forty-five. He had a candle burning, and in its flickering light he looked malevolent and strange. He stared at Jus.

"I jangle that cowbell at six in the morning," he snapped suddenly. "I s'pose you'll tell me go ahead and jangle it, hey?"

"That's right, Mr. Strickland. You just jangle it to your heart's content, because I won't hear it. I'm an early riser, and I'll have my horse attended to a half hour before that. Breakfast is five forty-five tomorrow. Good night!"

He went to his room, leaving Strickland staring after him open-mouthed.

The next morning, he walked down to the livery stable and brought up the grays and buckboard. The liveryman walked part of the way with him.

"I like to died, when you lifted old Port down yestiddy," the red-faced one confessed. "Mebbe it's what the old skin-flint needs—somebody to sarse him back. The town's pluggin' for you, cowboy. We put up with old Port long enough."

"Thanks," said Jus.

"All but one, that is. You'll get no good wishes from Blackie Crawford. A word to the wise, cowboy. I lived a long time because I got eyes in my back. I don't see any peep-holes in the back of your shirt. It might be a prime idea."

"Thanks," said Jus. "But do you tolerate back-shooters here as a regular thing? The town won't prosper."

"A word to the wise," the liveryman repeated. "Another reason I lived long is I don't usually mix in other people's troubles. Blackie's my friend! I wouldn't say a word against Blackie Crawford—no, sir! But a word to the wise, cowboy, is friendly to you, unfriendly to nobody."

He turned back. Jus tied the team by the gate and went in and carried Strickland out to the buckboard. Instead of getting in beside him, he went back and got his horse. Strickland complained that he did not like to handle the team.

"Go on!" said Jus, scornfully. "You handle 'em like a pair of old house-cats. I'm not a coachman, Mr. Strickland. I've got a percentage interest in the business, and I want to be able to ride out and see what we're buyin' from up close. Let her rip!"

They went through town that way, Jus riding beside the buckboard and talking cheerfully. Strickland did not answer. He never did give his approval to the arrangement, but Jus was sure the old man did approve it secretly.

"But he won't give me the satisfaction of saying so."

BEFORE the day was out, he found himself heartily disliking his job. He had not realized then what a vise-grip Strickland had on the community. In three hours riding eastward, they got out of the burned-over range. Bentgrass lay thick and dry here, and would make feed even under a foot of snow. A little farther on they came to hayfields, with literally hundreds of fenced-in haystacks. This lush area extended to the foothills, some ten miles away. The foothills themselves were barren, and beyond that lay the desert. Strickland pulled up and pointed with his whip.

"This here's my range. It's what we're going to winter three thousand head on." He cackled. "Fools think I ought to sell 'em hay. Sell 'em hay! Why, it's a seventy-mile haul if they don't get it from me. You can't haul feed that far and come out on it. I don't sell feed—I buy cows!"

"It's not very neighborly," Jus demurred.

"How much will you make on your percentage, if we deal in neighborliness?" Strickland shot back. "Let's go!"

He seemed to know the district intimately—who was overstocked, who was short of money, where to go to buy cheaply. It was sickening to watch, and his haggling brought a flush of shame to Justin Kinney's face. He saw men surrounded by their families—five, six, seven small children and a worried wife—stand up and try to beat a better price out of old Strickland. And they failed. Of course they failed!

"Wait until the buyers from the cities come in!" one haggard man threatened. "We'll get our price then."

"What buyers?" Strickland laughed. "Everybody knows we had lots of rain, good range, through here. The fire is local. There'll be no buyers because no one knows about it. Well, that's my best offer. Git up!"

Jus would never forget the look on the rancher's face. Strickland's team started up. The rancher turned white and started running after it. Jus sat his horse and watched until the man caught Strickland. The two argued a moment, Strickland shaking his head emphatically.

Jus swore and touched Brownie with his heels and cantered up to the buckboard.

"I think we can sweeten that about four bits a head, Mr. Strickland," he said. He was aware suddenly that his shame and anger showed, but he did not care. He would gladly have choked the old man. "On three hundred head, that's another hundred and fifty dollars. We can afford it."

Strickland found his voice to grate, "We can afford it! Why, you busted-down, ten-dollar saddle soldier you—"

"So long then, Mr. Strickland. Here's where we part company."

He rode away. As he expected, the buckboard soon came rattling after him. He slowed the pony down and let it catch up. They rode in silence for a while. As they neared town, Jus spoke curtly, without looking around.

"I've got to know whether to make arrangements to move that stock."

"I bought it," Strickland said, "and gave away a hundred and fifty dollars. Move it tomorrow, Kinney, before it loses any more weight."

Jus turned around then, intending to speak his appreciation, but old Strickland only said coldly, "Don't ever do that again, cowboy."

Jus felt his anger returning. He picked his words carefully.

"We look at things differently, old-timer. I was hunting for a job when I found this one, and I'm not married to you. I speak when I please and I don't scare worth a darn. Just keep that in mind."

"Don't ever do that again," Strick-

land repeated. His eyes glittered balefully. "Don't you do it, cowboy!"

JUS said nothing. That evening he waited in town, hoping Anson would show up. Sure enough, the big, happy-go-lucky ex-sergeant came in. Jus proposed that they ride out that night. He was fed up already, he said. But Anson shook his head unhappily.

"I'm plumb sorry, Jus," he said, "but only today I promised I'd stay until snow flies. Boss busted a bone in his ankle and he does need a dependable man." His expression changed. He grinned. "Aw, what do you want to move along for? Give old Port a couple more weeks of the lash."

"It will never change him," Jus said. "Something more than his legs is deformed. That man's twisted in his mind, too."

"Well-l-l," Anson drawled, "ketch holt of him with that second lieutenant's look you used on me now and then, and ontwist him. Son, you owe it to the country whose West Point beans you et and whose Army you bereaved, to make a Christian out of that old bull bison."

"All right," Jus sighed. "But I'm thinking he needs the rough handling of a good top sergeant more than he needs the handling of an officer and a gentleman."

"There!" Anson yelled. "There, you admit it! You own up right in broad daylight—you're a plumb gentleman! I always knowed there was something lackin' in you."

"Oh, you go drown yourself!" Jus said.

Anson looked around at the scorched prairie and said, "How fur do you reckon it is from this edge to the middle of that place, Jus?" And Jus said, "Shut up and buy me a beer." Anson hit him in the chest unexpectedly, a blow that was like the kick of a horse. They clinched and wrestled, and Jus made Anson yell for mercy with a hammerlock.

Then they went and had their beer. No, it hadn't been like this when they were in the army. . . .

Shipping time was a nightmare. By the end of the week, they had collected over fifteen hundred head in Strickland's pens. The old man fought over the number of men it would take to get them to railhead. He fought over what they should get paid. Jus overruled him on both points. He hired a dozen riders and started the herd moving.

Two miles out of town, Strickland in his buckboard caught up with them. He said nothing. Neither did Jus, although he felt like turning back. By evening, he wished he had. Strickland made life miserable for him. At every stop, he insisted on being lifted out of the buckboard and carried around. The riders, strange cowboys Jus had picked up as they drifted through on their way south for the winter, grinned up their sleeves to see him ordered around so.

Nights, Jus had to sleep next to Strickland, who said he feared robbery or even death in his sleep. Strickland insisted on sleeping with his forty-five inside of his blanket. Two or three times a night, Jus would have to get up and bring him a drink of water or do some other menial errand. By the time they had the stock loaded again, the hands paid off and had started back, he was ready to wring the old man's neck.

He had not believed it possible to hate a cripple as he hated Porter Strickland.

A week after they got back, Strickland again brought up the subject of Jus's pay. He began talking about it at supper, speaking in a whining, ingratiating voice that made Jus suspicious from the start.

"Mebbe I was a little too hasty with you, boy," he said. "You been a first-class help to me. Mebbe you're worth fifty. Shoot! Why should I fight with you over a few dollars? Tell you what

I'll do, Kinney—I'll go back and rewrite our deal from the word bang! Fifty a month it is!"

CHEWING slowly, Jus thought quickly. What had inspired this sudden change of view? Then he remembered seeing the stage driver come to the house that afternoon, and something clicked.

That was it, of course! Strickland had received his payment for his last fifteen hundred head of cattle.

"No, thanks," Jus said, grinning inwardly. "I couldn't let you cheat yourself that way, old-timer. I'm just naturally not worth fifty a month to you. When you come right down to it, I'm nothing but a worthless soldier that barely earns my salt. No, I can't do it to you—I just can't!"

They argued, and Jus wished Anson Deal could have heard them. Defeated at last, Strickland had Jus wheel him into his bedroom-office. Jus did so. On the table lay a canvas money bag, empty, and folded flat. Jus wondered where the money was, but only for a moment. Strickland's anxiety to make sure a certain drawer was closed showed him.

"Come on, Mr. Strickland," Jus shot at him. "How much was it? We might as well figure my share now."

"How much was what? I don't savvy, Kinney."

Jus moved toward the desk and reached for the drawer.

Instantly, the old man was on him, swarming over him like a monkey. Jus had never felt such powerful hands in his life. Blackie Crawford's grip was weak in comparison. Strickland's legs might be without strength, but his wrists and fingers made up for it.

Jus came back with his elbow and caught Strickland in the pit of the stomach, winding him and knocking him back in his chair. They glared at each other, Strickland fingering his breathless solar plexus and Jus shaking his aching wrists, to get the blood and feeling back in them.

"All right, old-timer, how much was it? Net profit, I mean!"

"Thir—thirteen hundred and sixty-eight dollars," Strickland quavered. "Here, I'll show you the books. Here's what they cost on this page and here's what they sold for. I'm a fair man, Kinney. You'll see I'm a fair man. I wouldn't try to cheat you!"

All the fight had suddenly gone out of him.

"That gives me a hundred and thirty-six dollars and eighty cents," Jus marveled. "No wonder you wanted to pay me fifty a month! Why, you skinflint old devil you, I made two-thirds of that myself! A dozen times I saved you from making mistakes on critters."

"I'll pay you, if you insist," Strickland whined. "But cowboy, the other's a better deal. Fifty a month, then, and you inherit everything when I die. Look—I had the will made out this afternoon, all witnessed and everything. See? Everything I possess goes to you, Justin Kinney, whom I designate as my friend, partner, assistant and 'standing in the stead of a son.' I'm worth a hundred thousand dollars, Kinney—"

"Less a hundred and thirty-six, eighty!" Jus interrupted. "Count it out, please, and let's light our cigarettes on that document."

"No, no! I'll put the will away, in case you change your mind. I like you, cowboy. I'll—all right, all right! Hold out your hand!"

For a while there was nothing but the slow, unwilling clink of gold pieces into Jus's hand. Strickland counted out a hundred and thirty dollars in gold, then seven silver dollars. Then he waited for Jus to give him twenty cents change. He held both dimes up to the light to make sure they were good before putting them in his pocket.

IV

LATER Jus spent the evening in the saloon, hoping Anson Deal would appear. He was light-hearted and hungry for fun, but Anson never did show up. Jus bought drinks for too many strangers and played too much stud poker, and at ten minutes after eleven was twenty dollars poorer.

"Boys, I'm away past taps. I'll have to call it a night," he said then.

They looked at him enviously. Word of his wealth had spread around town, which was already agog at his brusque treatment of the village tyrant.

"Heered he made his will out to you, too," said one. "Is that so?"

"Sure it's so!" said another. "Old Port had Jim Fletcher and Charley Boyd go up to the house and witness it."

Jus clinked the money in his pocket and said, "This is about the 'steenth will he's made out, and he'll make another hundred before he dies. He's too poison mean to die in season, but will live forever, like a Joshua tree or a jackass with a stripe down its back."

"Unless somebody kills him," the bartender murmured.

The door opened suddenly, and Blackie Crawford appeared in it. Seeing Jus, he hesitated, scowling. It was the first time the two had met since their fight. Apparently Blackie had been drinking heavily and working hardly at all. He wore the same clothes, and they showed it, and his beard had been let grow carelessly.

Yet somehow, Jus suddenly felt any enmity go out of him, Crawford looked so forlorn and hopeless and disappointed.

He's not much of a man, and he did take a lot of punishment from Strickland, he thought. Now his chance at that hundred thousand-dollar estate is gone, and all he's got left is bull strength and awkwardness. The poor devil feels he's been cheated—and by the great horn spoon, he has!

Jus had seen men like Crawford come into the Army. Some of them could be whipped into shape, and they made mighty soldiers. Others disgraced themselves early. What could a good company commander do with a dull-witted giant like Blackie?

There was an air of hangdog shame about Blackie, as though he felt he had disgraced himself by getting fired by Porter Strickland. Under his whiskers his face reddened, but he stood his ground, half in and half out of the door. Cold air moved in around him, chilling the room quickly.

Jus had been about to leave. These others knew it. He dreaded another fight with Blackie, but he could not have them think he had to back down.

"Good night," he said, and started for the door.

Blackie almost moved out of the way, and caught himself in time. His eyes narrowed, and he swallowed, holding his position in the door. Jus stopped in front of him.

"Excuse me, Crawford."

Blackie lunged at him. Jus sidestepped and started a swift left jab at Blackie's face.

His dread of a fight vanished—Blackie would be easier this time than he had been before.

But halfway there, the fist stopped. He happened to meet Blackie's eye then, and the big man had such a look to him that Jus could not hit him. He realized suddenly that Blackie dreaded the fight more than he did, but was under the same compulsion to go through with it. It would be shorter, bloodier, more merciless this time. It would be a memorable fight, not for its violence but for its scientific brevity.

And Blackie would never be able to live it down.

"Excuse me!" he said again.

BLACKIE, ducking away from the fist, threw up his arms with a hoarse cry. Jus put his head down and ducked under the huge arm, brushing against Blackie and knocking him slightly off balance. In a twinkling their positions were reversed—Jus was standing in the door and Blackie was inside the saloon, trying to recover his equilibrium and brandishing his fists at thin air.

"Good night!" said Jus.

He let the door swing shut behind him. They would think he had dodged the fight but—well, let them! He'd be out of town in a matter of days and never see any of them again. Blackie had to live here.

"I just couldn't hit him!" Jus said to himself. "They'll always think that first fight was a fluke, that I was afraid to try it again. They'll never believe a man his size could fear one my size. But I just couldn't hit him. Oh, well!"

The wind was cold. He turned up his denim collar, pulled his hat down over his ears, and headed for Porter Strickland's place. He hated the thought of entering it, of waiting for Strickland to pull that latchstring, of spending a night in the bitter loneliness of that house. That's what an evening of jovial companionship did. He wished Anson had not promised to stay. He wished Anson's boss had not broken his ankle.

Candlelight glimmered through the heavy blinds that covered Strickland's office window. Jus knocked, and waited. There was no answer. He knocked again, more loudly, and shouted, "Hey!" Still there was no answer.

Startled, Jus shook the door. The latch was notched in; it did not move. He shouted again, and again there was no answer.

Then he thought he heard a noise around the corner of the house—a furtive, panicky scuffling and the ring of something solid against glass. He leaped down the steps and ran around the house, drawing his gun as he ran. His skin prickled, and his shoulder-blades itched.

There was nothing—no sound, no sight, no sign—at the other window. The shade was tightly drawn, but candlelight twinkled through its tiny pores. Jus struck a match and looked at the ground.

"Boot heels! High-heeled cowboy boots, and fresh tracks, too. Somebody was tamperin' with the window!" He straightened up, the tingling more acute all over his body, and rapped on the window. "Strickland! Are you there? Are you all right? Hey!"

After a second came Strickland's quavering voice.

"Is—is that you, Jus?" It was the first time he had ever used the Christian name. "Is that you? I—I thought somebody was arter me! Wh-why don't you come around by the door!"

"I did!"

"But not first! You come to the window first!"

"Let me in! Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Kinney." His voice was stronger, more sure of itself. "Come around by the door and I'll pull the string. Watch out as you come in."

Jus ran back to the door and rapped, but Strickland made him identify himself again before pulling the string. He was certainly taking no chances, Jus thought. When the door swung back, Jus stepped inside and slammed the door shut behind him. He stood there a moment, listening carefully. Then he went into Strickland's room.

The old cripple had hoisted himself into his bed, but he had taken his money and his gun with him. The blankets were drawn up over his useless legs, and the gold was spilled on them in little twinkling circlets of yellow light. Strickland's face was white and haggard, but his eyes burned fiercely.

"See there!" he shrilled. "See why I

don't want you out arter night? Anything could happen to me—but no, you don't care! Sure, let the old man be murdered—you got the will in your favor."

"Shut up caterwauling and keep your gun cocked," Jus interrupted, "while I look through the house. Give me your candle."

"No!"

JUS swore as the old man yanked the candle stub out of reach. He feared the dark like a child. Jus whirled and went through the big echoing old house, trying windows. Apparently nothing had been disturbed. He returned to the office. "What happened, anyway? Tell me about it."

"I—I was just goin' over my books and my cash, when I heered someone at the front window. Then I heered him at the side window. Then next thing I heered you on the porch, but I didn't reckonize you and I was too skeered to holler."

Jus stared at him.

"You old devil, you're not afraid of anything that lives," he said shortly, for the moment feeling it was true. "You just let on you didn't hear, hoping you'd get a chance to shoot some poor, luckless prowler. Why, I believe you hoped you'd get a chance to shoot me!"

"Kinney, you shouldn't cod me, when I'm all wrought up this way," Strickland pleaded. "This is what comes of leavin' a defenseless cripple home nights. Don't ever do it again."

Their eyes locked. Strickland cocked his head sidewise. But all the time his powerful hands were busy gathering up the gold pieces, collecting them skilfully into neat little piles. Jus jammed the gun savagely into his holster and went out, slamming the door behind him. The draft blew out the candle. He could hear Strickland still swearing five minutes later. . . .

It was gray dawn, and the light through the window had a three o'clock look in it, when he was awakened by a pounding on the front door. Jus came awake at the first rap, and by the third one had swung his feet out of bed and was reaching for his gun and matches.

"Just a minute!" he called.

The floor was icy. He stopped to slip on his socks and trotted to the door in his underwear. As he passed through the barren front room, he heard Strickland stirring.

"What is it?" he snarled. "Who's raisin' all the blasted ruckus?"

"Shut up until I find out!" Jus snapped. He threw the latch and let the door swing open a couple of inches. The face of the livery stable proprietor, ruddy as ever but wearing an unaccountable look of horror, met his gaze. Jus realized then that he had stuck the barrel of the gun out before peering out himself. He withdrew the gun and opened the door, motioning the liveryman inside.

"No, I don't want to wake old Port and raise a fuss," the man whispered. "You was a friend of Anson Deal's, wasn't you?"

A chill of apprehension went through Jus.

"Was? What kind of gab is this?" he said roughly.

"Anson's been killed. Shot in the back. I—"

Jus threw the door back and yanked the startled man inside.

"What are you trying to tell me?" he grated. "Anson Deal's dead?"

"Hey! You're a-breakin' my arm!" the liveryman wailed. Jus let go of him and the man went on: "I found him in my own livery stable, my place of business. I s'pose that's why nobody heered the shots. I got in four big loads of hay, don't you see, and until I could get it h'isted up into the loft I had it stacked around the walls on the down-wind side,

and it muffled the noise, I reckoned. You wouldn't hear anything on the other side, because the wind would carry it the other—"

"Get to the point, get to the point! Who did it?"

"Hey! Why, I don't know who did it. Leastwise, I couldn't prove nothin'. I figger Anson had just got in, had just put his hoss up afore headin' for the saloon. He was shot twicet. He wasn't there at nine o'clock, when I was last through the stable. He must of come in not long after that, because he's cold by now. Shot in the back. I thought I'd come to you, Kinney, because you was his best friend. Seems like he was a pretty good boy, and well-liked, but after all he was just another stray rider here. Mebbe you'd want to do a little more for him, I thought—"

"What's this—what's this?" Strickland kept calling. "Somebody answer me! What's this? What's this?"

"Oh, shut up!" Jus said, mechanically. It was hard to think or feel, even, and harder still to put up with the malevolant old cripple's petty complaints. "Wait here until I get some clothes on. Or go on in and tell Strickland about it." He turned, raising his voice: "It's the livery stable man. My best friend's been murdered. He's coming in to tell you about it. Keep that cannon of yours turned the other way."

He pushed the liveryman toward Strickland's room and ran to his own to dress. He heard the liveryman's voice begin, "Hello, Mr. Strickland. I shore didn't aim to wake you. Well, it's like this, see—I was just takin' a look at a sick horse about a half-hour ago, see, and—"

V

MORE than a dozen men had collected by the time they got to the stable, despite the hour. The saloonkeeper was there, and two of the loafers who apparently made their living gambling in his place, and the fat old Dutchman who kept the general store. They had not moved Anson. Jus pushed them aside and went to his partner's body, and two men held lanterns for him to see. He knelt down and touched Anson's hand. It was like ice.

The big cowboy would laugh no more. He had unsaddled his horse in an empty stall and come through the central alleyway here to hang up saddle and bridle. He had gotten the saddle up, and it hung by one stirrup from a wooden peg, but he had dropped with the bridle in his hand.

The first slug had been low, probably because he was standing on tiptoe to place the bridle. It had caught him in the spine, just over the kidneys. Low, but fatal. Still, the murderer had tried again. The second shot had come before Anson could fall. Again it had hit the spine, between the shoulder blades.

Jus looked around.

"Shot from over there, through the back window, and right between Strickland's two gray horses," he said somberly. "The wind carried the sound away from the window and the hay, yonder, muffled it from the street. Good shooting, because the light is worse in here than it is outside. He couldn't have seen more than a shadow, a shape—yet he managed to center two slugs. Who around here can shoot like that?"

He stood up. No one answered him.

"Who handles a gun like that?" he repeated, grimly. "Don't be afraid to tell on him, because he's not going to handle it that way any more. Come on, let's have it!"

He seized the shirt-front of the man nearest him and yanked. Their two faces almost touched, and he let go with his right hand to jab his forefinger into the other's solar plexus. Then the others laid hands on him and pulled him

away from the squirming man.

"Don't act thataway, Kinney," the saloon man said firmly. "Nobody wants to hide no murderers, but then, nobody wants to speak out on suspicions, neither. The sheriff's been sent for. It's only twelve miles if he's to home, and he's a good man."

Three of them still held him. Jus looked from face to face and saw no hostility. They were on his side. They liked Anson Deal, too. Liked him? Why, nobody had ever disliked him—that is, if you didn't count that old bullheaded colonel. He shook himself free, and they saw his changed expression and released their grips.

"All right. You don't need to tell me. But if I was to mention Blackie Crawford's name, every man here would jump." They did start uneasily, and glance at the window, where gray light showed over the two gray horses. "I hung around town until eleven-ten last night, waiting for this boy. While I was waiting, he was riding into your town, and putting up his horse here. Just before I left, Blackie Crawford showed up. Some of you saw how he acted. I wonder if one of you would be man enough to say what happened after I left. I think I know what happened before he came to the saloon."

Again it was the saloon man who spoke. He had always seemed to be an affable nonentity before this, but Jus respected him now for speaking his mind.

"Don't jump your horse 'fore you reach your fence, Kinney," he said doggedly. "I'll tell you what happened! Blackie took a pint over in the corner and got drunk. Time was a pint wouldn't do it, but Blackie can't drink lately, since he's so wrought up.

"Then he went upstairs, in the old batch-room I used before I was married, and went to sleep. For all I know he's there now. And, friend Kinney, you're not going to brace him until he's had a chance to get on his duds and come down."

AT THE saloon man's gesture, they took hold of Jus again and held him firmly. Jus struggled to get loose, and then struggled to get at his gun. One of them took his gun.

"Look at the chance he gave Anson!" he raged. "Then you want me to give him a chance. How you town boys hang together! How you town boys, you home guards, do hate a man that rides through!"

"We liked ol' Anson!" the saloon man protested.

"Sure, you liked him, but still you'll back your own!" Jus shouted.

"Until you prove it was Blackie—yes," said the other, firmly. "Mebbe we got some idees, too, Kinney. But we don't know. Neither do you. Prove it was Blackie and you can shoot him in his sleep. Otherwise—" He jogged the liveryman with his elbow. "Jim, go stir Blackie out of the hay. Scare the Holy Moses out of him, so he wakes up sober. We'll meet you two out in front of my place in—well, say five minutes. And Jim—make sure he's there! I'd take a gun, I believe."

The liveryman got a revolver out of his office and set off for the saloon at a dead run. The saloon man took out his watch and held it up to the window. The light was still insufficient. He held it to the lantern.

"Three-twelve, right in the briskit," he announced solemnly.

The silence that followed let them hear the steady, relentless ticking of the big watch. The long row of horses blew softly and nuzzled their hay and stamped and looked out curiously. Jus saw the gray team reaching over the manger toward him. He had handled them so much lately that they had come to know him, and liked him. He went over to scratch their noses. Two men

followed him, trying to look unconcerned.

"Three-seventeen and a half," the saloon man announced. "Just to be on the safe side we'll give him—oh, pshaw, why give him anything? All right, Kinney. You can go see him now."

"Thanks," said Jus. They handed him his gun. He examined it with meticulous care by the light of the lantern. Then his eyes met the saloon man's.

"I mean that, Mr. Whisky. I was brought up on Army justice and I'd be sorry to violate it. A man could trust his life to you, Mr. Whisky. So—thanks!"

"Oh, pshaw!" said the saloon man. "Man flies off'n the handle easy, I guess. I just spoke my piece, that's all."

"A man could trust you, nevertheless," Jus said.

He holstered the gun and stepped out into the street. The liveryman was sitting on the step of the saloon with his arms folded. He got up and backed through the door.

Blackie Crawford might have been drunk when he was first awakened, but he was stone sober now. He was fully dressed except for his coat. A cartridge belt sagged around his big hips, and a forty-five was heavy against his huge leg. He did not reel or weave or tremble. He stood half facing Jus, his thick body twisted, his right knee bent toward Jus, and his right hip protruding.

Blackie moved only slightly as Jus approached. He had been holding his big hands chest-high, the fingers slightly curved. Now, with a sigh, he lowered his hands and tilted forward. Jus felt his own palms tingle and itch for his gun.

When they were less than twenty feet apart, he saw Blackie go into motion. The big man's right hand swept down. Jus went for his own gun.

The weapon was in his hand and half out of the holster when he saw Blackie's face change. The big man's poise and bravado went. His hand came away from his gun and he held it out, palm upward, in a plea for mercy. Jus stopped, fingering his gun, and stared.

"No—no!" Blackie mumbled. His face worked. "I didn't do it! I didn't do it! You can't do this to me, Kinney. You can't kill me in cold blood. It wasn't me that did it. No—no—I didn't do it!"

JUS dropped his gun back into the holster. He found it hard to shape words with his angrily stiff mouth.

"Draw! Draw your gun, Blackie Crawford! Because if you don't, I'm going to execute you. I'll shoot you right between the eyes, Blackie. I'm giving you three seconds to draw your gun, Blackie. One—two—three!"

"No—no—you can't do it to me, Kinney—"

And Jus saw then that Blackie was right. He couldn't shoot a man in cold blood. He couldn't make Blackie draw and he couldn't shoot him unless he did draw. Blackie sank to his knees on the sidewalk and covered his face with his hands, moaning over and over—"I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't do it! Honest to God, Kinney, I didn't do it!"

Jus jammed the gun back into its holster and paced deliberately down to the kneeling man. He took Blackie's gun out and threw it away. He unbuckled the holster from around the huge trunk and was about to throw it away, too. Something happened in his mind, then. The length and weight of the heavy, cartridge-studded belt reminded him of Anson Deal's. Anson always had to have the biggest equipment in the company.

After that, he did not remember clearly what happened. He brought the belt up over his head and down over Blackie's head. Cartridges went flying and the flat holster slapped against Blackie's bearded cheek. Blackie moaned and tried to cover himself but he did not

fight back. Again and again the belt rose and came down. Lower and lower Blackie crouched, until he was stretched out face down on the sidewalk. Jus continued to beat him.

After a while, it seemed that the limp belt was hateful to his hand. He threw it into the street with the last strength in his arm. Despite the early morning chill, he was exhausted, wet with sweat. His shirt clung to his body and his breath came jerkily.

On the faces of the saloon man, the livery stable man, and the others was blank horror. They parted silently as he came toward them, but over his shoulder he saw them following, silently, as he returned to the big yellow house.

As he reached the sagging gate, Clem, the handy-man, appeared, rubbing his eyes and yawning. His weak chin dropped and he scuttled around the corner of the house, babbling alarm. From inside the house came Porter Strickland's petulant voice.

"Clem! Clem! Go git Kinney. Dang it, are you goin' to leave me helpless here? Clem! Git Kinney! I want my breakfast."

Jus turned and looked at them from the porch. To his somewhat dull surprise, he saw that Blackie Crawford had followed, trailing along a hundred yards behind, to pause safely back out of gunshot. The big man was pitiful to behold. The belt had cut and bruised his face until it was barely recognizable as a face, yet out of the welted mass his two eyes were clearer, cooler, steadier than Jus had ever seen before.

"Go back," said Jus. "What I'm going to do now won't be pretty to see. I made a mistake. I whipped an innocent man —a man with nothing on his conscience but a weak will to be decent—and bad luck! You won't like what comes next."

"Kinney!" came Strickland's voice. "Is that you? Come heft me down. What's the ruckus about? Kinney, by the Eternal, I want you!"

"Go back," Jus said.

"No. Cowboy," the saloon man said, "this is our town and you haven't done yourself very proud so fur. We'll set in for one more card."

"Kinney!" Strickland wailed. "Come h'ist me inter my chair. Kinney!"

"Go back!" Jus said. They did not budge. He shrugged. "All right! But don't anybody make a move. I'm shore in my mind now of what's wrong—and I think Blackie Crawford is, too."

BY THE look on Blackie's face he knew the big man agreed with him, was overjoyed to see the thing that had troubled him so long come out into the open. Blackie had hitched his gun around his middle again. He took it out now and covered the crowd, nodding over their heads to Jus.

"Nobody will make a move, Kinney," he said, in a surprisingly strong voice. "I'll see one more card myself—and I think I can call its color!"

Jus nodded. He turned and tried the door. It was latched. He heard Strickland pull the string. The door came open, but he did not go in.

Instead, he took a match from his pocket and knelt down. He struck the match and looked about for something to ignite. Dried grass that had been missed by the fire grew up between the porch floor planks. He touched the match to the grass and it flared up brightly, caught a pine knot, and began to sputter with a bluer, hotter flame.

As a curl of smoke began to rise from first one crack and then another, the crowd in front stirred restively, and the saloon man cried out. But when he started to move toward his gun, Blackie shouted a warning. There was the kind of look in Blackie's eye that backed the saloon man down.

The smoke hid the front door. A

tongue of yellow flame, three feet high, licked at the wall. The glass in the front window cracked with the heat. Jus turned his back and walked off the porch, holding his breath against the smoke.

"Kinney!" came Strickland's terrified voice. "I smell smoke! Kinney! The house is af'ar! Oh, you're goin' to let me burn to death here. Kinney!"

VI

HOARSELY the voice kept calling. Clouds, early morning fall mist, had crept over the first pinkish clues of sun, and the rapidly rising pall of smoke darkened the air still more.

"Kinney! Kinney! Please he'p me. Please don't let me burn to death. Oh—Kinney, Kinney, Kinney! I'm chokin'. There ain't no air! Kinney! Help—help—help!"

Then the voice ceased for a minute. There came a curious clinking sound. It came again, and again, and again. The saloon man made another move, but Blackie Crawford had come up closer. He took the saloon man's elbow and twitched, and the saloon man sprawled on the ground. The clinking noise came again, and then the window in Strickland's bedroom broke and a gold piece came out. They realized then what had made the clinking sound.

Porter Strickland, in an effort to get air, had been throwing gold pieces at the window!

But the sudden inrush of air sent the flames roaring higher and filled the room with more smoke than ever. The whole front of the house was a mass of fire now. The seconds dragged out like minutes. Jus waited somberly. Again and again old Strickland called.

"Kinney! Kinney! Kinney!"

And, from the ground, the saloon man screamed, "You can't burn a cripple to death! I'll—" Heedless of his own danger, he scrambled to his knees, striking at Jus. Blackie pushed him down, growling, "Wait a minute, wait a minute and stay healthy, friend."

Suddenly a figure appeared in the smoke-wreathed front window — a gaunt, white-haired figure bearing a lantern aloft in a futile, hopeless effort to see through the smoke. It was Porter Strickland, who seemed to have been lifted by some strange force to man-height. He waved the lantern, searching for landmarks, gasping and choking in an effort to find his voice.

He saw them, gave a strangled cry, and tumbled out of the window, still clinging to the lantern. He fell sprawling on the ground and lay there a moment, crying, "Kinney—Kinney—Kinney!" The saloon man moaned with horror.

But the moan died as old Strickland suddenly stood up and threw away the lantern. It was incredible, but there he was—tall and strong and rangy and powerful, standing on his own legs with no appearance of weakness. His face had changed, too. Gone was the crafty helplessness, the somewhat pitiful look of appeal.

Instead, the bushy eyebrows had closed together in a scowl. The eyes glittered with purposeful ferocity. His big jaw was clenched, his mouth drawn into a cruel, clamped line.

Jus remembered those two deadly-accurate slugs which had shivered Anson Deal's spine, and the old man's easy familiarity with a forty-five. His own body went slightly cold, and his feet were like lead as he picked up first one and then the other, walking with tremendous effort to meet Strickland. By the crackling yellow flame-light, he saw the forty-five at Strickland's hip.

The old man emerged from the pall of smoke and paused, squinting and leaning forward in a half-crouch. His claw-like right hand flexed, closed, opened—

curved downward with dizzy, flashing speed.

The shock and pound and deafening crash of the two guns came together. Jus felt his own gun recoil again and again, against the heel of his palm. His hand felt damp, the gun slippery, his muscles flaccid, but he bit his lip and crouched and squirmed and shut his mind to everything except the deadly need to keep shooting—and shooting—and shooting—

He did not see his first slug strike, but he heard Strickland's plow into the ground between his legs. Gravel showered around his ankles, and he kept on pressing the trigger.

Strickland was hurled backward, but he fought for balance, flailing his arms. His eyes closed, opened, showing white all around. His gun crashed again at arm's length, the slug burying itself in the burning house, sending up a shower of sparks.

AND Jus Kinney kept on shooting after Strickland had crumpled on his face—kept shooting until his gun went empty, and he realized he had been firing blindly into the roaring blaze. Then he holstered his gun and ran forward. He seized Strickland by the shoulders and, covering his face against the intense heat, dragged his body away from the fire.

He dumped the man down in front of Blackie Crawford and said, "There!" Blackie blinked and nodded, but he could not answer.

"I guess that proves everything, answers everything," Jus went on dully. "You suspected it from the first, didn't you?"

"Yes," Blackie whispered. "I thought I saw him running away from where that Mexican cattle-buyer was shot in the back. But how could that be? He was laying in the house, paralyzed from the waist down! Since then it's been like a nightmare."

Jus turned to the others. There was nothing to explain to Blackie. The big man's confidence seemed to have returned completely. He was cool, sure of himself, a different man altogether. The saloon man, the livery stable man, all the others, seemed to still doubt their senses.

"I should have known when I saw those boot-tracks under the window last night," Jus said. He went on to explain about the prowler that had caused the excitement as he returned home the evening before. "They were the tracks of a big man. I thought first of Blackie, but I didn't say anything.

"I should have known down there at the livery stable, because the shots were fired from between those two grays of Strickland's. The killer came up to the open window behind them, leaned in with his gun between them, and shot my friend.

"That's a spirited team, almost a wild one. I've wondered lots of times how old Strickland could handle them. I don't care how much strength you've got in your arms if you can't brace yourself with your legs to use it. Yet he drove them like a bronco-buster. It was partly that he used his legs, partly the fact that the grays knew him! No other man could have leaned in between them last night without getting his head kicked off!"

"He wasn't crippled at all!" the saloon man whispered, incredulously. "He faked it all along."

"Not all the time," Jus contradicted. "At first he probably was temporarily paralyzed when he was knocked back over the manger, with a two-by-four in the small of his back. But he was knocked out, too, you remember. I'm told he was carried back to his house, where he came to and discovered his legs were lost to him.

"Then he had himself locked in his

room! That's understandable—no man wants a crowd around when he first discovers himself a cripple! While he was locked in, the feeling and strength came back to his legs, no doubt.

"But there was one ruling passion in Porter Strickland's life—gold! He hated the Mexican more for outbidding him than for beating him. While the door was locked—while everyone pitied poor old Port Strickland, who had lost a pair of strong legs—he opened the window, slipped out and murdered the Mexican. Then he got back through the window.

"But after that he dared not recover! Blackie Crawford had seen him, and so long as he remained a helpless cripple, he could count on the very impossibility of it confusing Blackie. But if ever Blackie saw him walk again, he'd remember the gait and shape and a hundred other little characteristics of the man he saw fleeing from the scene of the Mexican's murder.

"That's why he hired Blackie! He had to have him near at hand, to watch him, to browbeat him, to dangle a hundred thousand-dollar inheritance before his eyes—to convince Blackie he was a hopeless cripple—by a dozen means to keep him silent."

He turned to Blackie.

"Crawford, why did he fire you? What happened to bring that about?"

BLACKIE could barely talk, so shapelessly swollen were his lips.

"I—I got the suspicion too strong to be downed," he said. "Sometimes when I carried him, I thought I felt his legs twitch. I'd throw him off balance in my arms, kind of, and he'd jerk himself back—with his legs! I guess he didn't dare let me carry him any more."

Jus nodded. "You're big enough to do as you like with his weight. That's why he hired me, a smaller man. But so long as you had a suspicion in your mind, he wasn't safe. That's why he killed Anson Deal. Anson's about your size.

"After I left the house last night, he slipped out of the window, leaving the door latched, and prowled the town. He saw Anson go into the livery stable and shot him. Then he went home, but I got there before he could slip through the window. That's the noise I heard. He must have just made it inside before I got around the corner. He had to have time to get his boots off and get under the covers before he 'recognized' me and let me in.

"But he still had to explain the candle, which he'd left burning. So he got his money out and began 'counting' it. After a moment he let me in. That's why he insisted his hired man had to be in bed by ten o'clock. Strickland had to use his legs now and then, or go crazy. He couldn't risk meeting his own man about the place, or between it and the town. No, he had to be sure the man was safely in bed, with all doors locked, before he did any moving around on his feet."

Jus was suddenly so weary he was almost sick at his stomach. The empty gun at his hip weighed him down like—well, like Strickland's body once had weighted him down. He could almost feel the malevolent old man's "useless" legs swinging against his own.

"Sheriff'll be here soon," the saloon man said, uncertainly. "He's a good man, Kinney. And you've got witnesses. You'll like the sheriff if you still favor justice, Kinney. He's square."

The roof of the house collapsed inward, sending up a geyser of embers. Clem, the handy-man, appeared at the edge of the crowd, goggle-eyed. Jus jerked a thumb at him.

"Clem, get my horse out."

Clem darted away. Jus turned to Blackie and put out his hand.

"Blackie, I understand Strickland turned over to you the will he made in your favor. You've still got it?" Blackie

nodded. "Well, there was a later one, but it went up in smoke. You're a hundred thousand-dollar man. You've got it coming, Blackie. Money couldn't square what you went through, if it was me."

They clasped hands and Blackie muttered, " 'Tain't my place, really, Kinney. Everybody knowed about the later will. You've got witnesses. It was you proved out the varmint, and I'll settle for peace of mind."

"No." Jus shook his head. "The will went up in smoke. I'll not wait for the sheriff. Will you do one thing for me, Blackie? Will you see that Anson Deal gets decent burial, and a headstone?"

"I'll do that," said Blackie. "Anything you want."

Clem came up with the brown pony then, and Jus swung up into the saddle. He waved at them, and his money chinkled and tinkled in his pocket as the pony stirred restively. There was still over a hundred and twenty dollars.

By noon, he had ridden out of the burned-over mesa and was in green grass again.

The Origin of the Horse

By COLE WEYMOUTH

THOUGH it is generally agreed that the horse, as we know it today, was brought to America by the Spaniards, fossil remains indicate that the horse may actually have originated in America. The theory is that an early form of the horse, such as the Eohippus, a small four toed animal, evolved in the western part of the United States.

The first historical record of horses comes from Babylonia about 2300 B.C. From Mesopotamia and the river basins of the Tigris and the Euphrates, a wandering nomadic tribe called the Elamites brought the horse to Babylonia.

The Babylonians, as well as the Egyptians and Hebrews, had never seen the horse, their work animal was the ass—or donkey. About 1700 B.C. the horse was in common usage in Egypt and because of its strength and speed, was used in war, both as saddler and to pull armed chariots. The ancient Hebrew tribes used horses similarly and so on down to the Romans whose conquering march spread them over the then civilized world and even to the isles of Britain.

Arabian horses were brought to England during the reign of Henry the First, about 1125 A.D. and the superior strains of the Arabians stimulated an active interest in horse breeding which has never died out.

Columbus brought horses to the New World in his second voyage of 1493 and from thence on a stream of brood mares and stallions poured into the West Indies and in that prolific climate increased at an astounding rate. They soon spread to the mainland through Panama and Peru and presently were running wild, just as they later did on the plains of the western United States. The spreading of horses throughout the southwest is generally attributed to the expeditions of such explorers as de Soto.

De Soto undoubtedly left horses in Florida from his landing at Tampa in 1539, and de Narvaez got there even earlier, in 1528. It is interesting to note that a member of de Narvaez expedition was Cabeza de Vaca, a man who has left his name imprinted in the history of stock raising in the west.

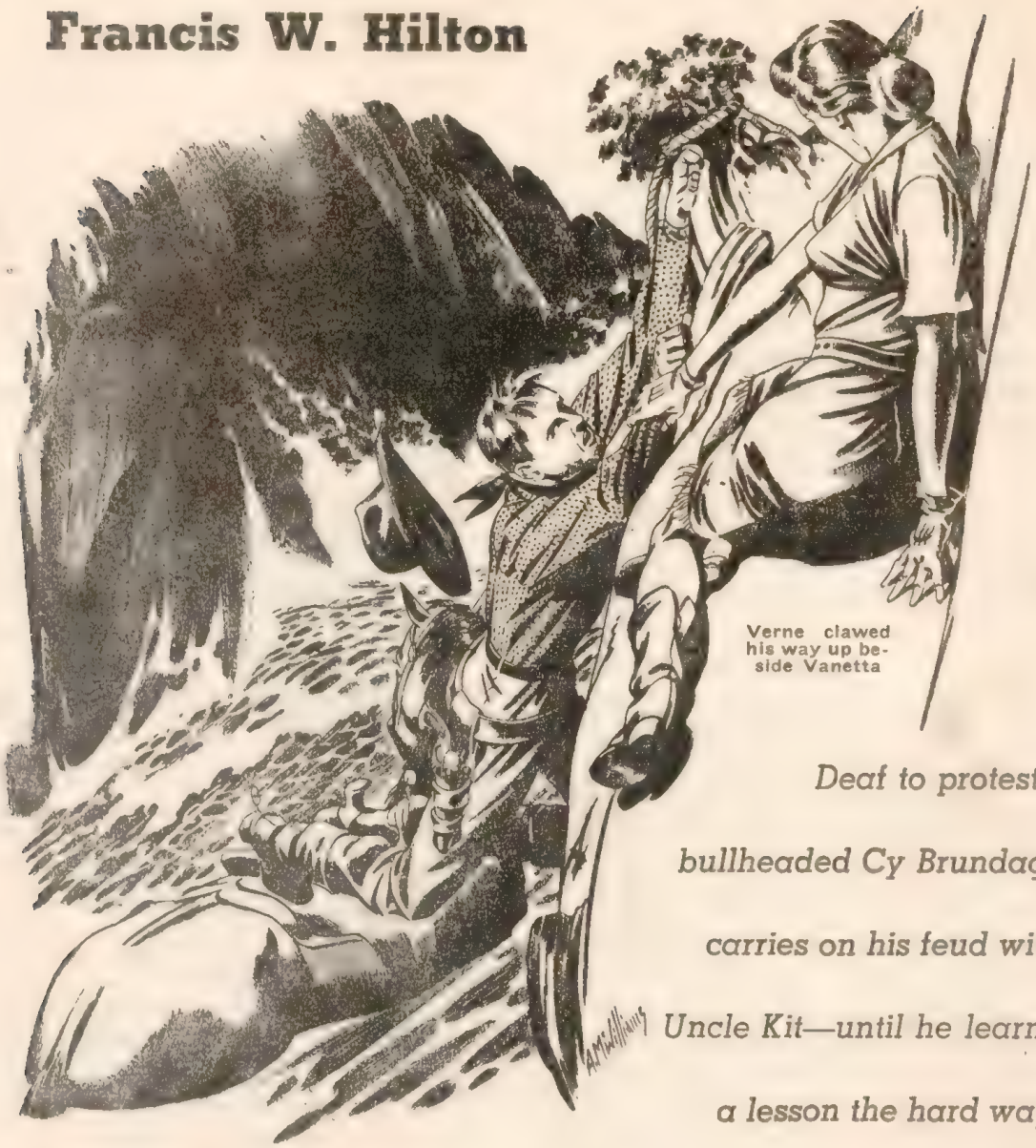
Horses were brought across from England for the use of the Pilgrims and other colonists of the Atlantic seaboard and at the same time the budding Dutch and Swedish colonists imported their own breeds of horses from the mother countries. It is possible that some of these horses escaped, or were stolen by Indians, for at least one explorer, de Vries, testifies to some northern tribes already possessing horses in 1643, long before there was any possibility of their having come in contact with southern tribes, who might have acquired their horses from the Spaniards.

Thus it was at a comparatively early period that the horse was already well distributed over the New World.

THIRSTY CATTLE

by

Francis W. Hilton



Verne clawed his way up beside Vanetta

Deaf to protests, bullheaded Cy Brundage carries on his feud with Uncle Kit—until he learns a lesson the hard way!

ANOTHER Buzzard Basin beef roundup was over. Boisterous, fun-hungry cowboys swarmed like locusts on Nakota. They packed the one saloon. They prowled the dusty street. They overran the weather-beaten Nakota House in search of baths and beds. They stood in line outside the one-chair barbershop. They howled, sang, shouted, yelled and raised the devil in general.

The "Katy" riders—men from old Uncle "Kit" Thornton's K T spread—were celebrating, hunkered on their spur shanks out of the blazing sun in the rear of the Nakota general store. Beside them was a case of canned peaches, empty now save for four cans the cowboys nursed grudgingly, ate with smacking relish.

Below, across the single track spur line, the loading pens were jammed with bawling cattle. Hungry cattle drifted over the surrounding sagebrush flats

dragging hot, dusty guards like anchor chains behind them. Thirsty cattle puddled the slime of a trickling creek, sucked loudly at the brackish ooze.

"Well, how does that fix you up, boys?" Uncle Kit Thornton, a frosty runt of a man with the face of a skookum doll, speared the last peach in his can with the long blade of a jackknife. "Could you go for another case?" He swiped the white stubble on his dripping chin with the back of a grimy hand. "How about you, Verne?"

"For once in my life I've had my fill of canned peaches, thanks to you, Uncle Kit." Young Verne Strand, old Kit's nephew and Katy foreman, smiled. A friendly, contagious smile that softened the lines of his strong, bronzed face, melted the chill of icy blue eyes. "I'm fuller than a tick on a fat ewe." He drained the last drop of juice from his can, sighed, rubbed his lean torso appreciatively. "That's the finest treat I ever had."

THE others agreed by cleaning their cans with satisfied gurgles.

"Better be movin' along then." Uncle Kit pulled himself up stiffly to stand on shaky, bowed legs. "We'll be loaded pronto. Then we can head for the Katy. I'll be glad to get home, too. I'm gettin' too old to ride roundup. The heat and all gets me."

"You'll take it easy from now on, Uncle Kit." Verne bounded to his feet with the agility of an acrobat. He slapped dust from his levis and a faded shirt, skin-tight across his massive shoulders. "You'll make enough on this shipment to knock off work. Maybe get yourself one of those mail-order brides and settle down."

The suggestion brought a laugh from the punchers trailing along the side of the building to the street.

"Thornton!" came a shout. "Where's Kit Thornton?"

"It's Cy Brundage," Uncle Kit said. "Wonder what he wants? Here I am, Cy!" he called.

A hulking man came toward them, store clothes stiff with newness. He was fuming. His heavy, leathery face worked with anger.

"What do you mean by loadin' your Katys ahead of my Flyin' Anchors?" he demanded.

Uncle Kit lifted a battered hat to run shaky fingers through sparse, wet white hair.

"Well, now, Cy—" he began.

"The Flyin' Anchor is holdin' two thousand head outside in this boilin' sun while you're loadin' your measly few hundred," Brundage cut him short. "There's only twelve stock cars in the yards. The agent says you're takin' them all. And he can't get any more for three days."

"Our stuff was powerful ga'nt from long lack of water," Uncle Kit offered apologetically. "We figured yours could stand waitin' better."

"You figured to hog the cars, that's what you figured!" Brundage exploded. "I've seen dirty deals but this here is the worst!"

The Katy punchers leaned against the building to watch in amusement. For years they had chuckled over the petty bickering of the two lifelong friends who wrangled constantly. That is, the big, arrogant Brundage did the wrangling. Old Kit Thornton usually bore his outbursts in silence.

But for once mild-mannered Kit erupted. "My critters have been thirsty all summer," he cried. "I had to ship them quick or lose them. And you're a liar if you say—" He lunged for the burly Brundage. Verne caught him in a powerful grip, pulled him back.

"Take it easy, Uncle Kit," The young cowboy soothed the sputtering, squirming old fellow. "I'll do your talkin' for you. It's time Brundage was told off anyway. He's run things in Buzzard Basin long enough. I'm goin to have somethin' to say from now on."

"Be careful, Verne." His flash of anger past, old Kit leaned weakly against the building, clutching the front of his shirt.

"Cy can't threaten you any more, Uncle Kit," Verne said. "You ain't able to take it. But I am."

"You—you—" Brundage choked. "There's two thousand Flyin' Anchors outside the stockyards in the sun shrinkin' by the minute. The pens are jam-packed with Katys, just because this old devil came to Nakota three weeks ago and ordered cars."

"I came to Nakota three weeks ago and ordered cars," Verne corrected coldly. "Because I knew this pool would be like all the others. You'd corner the cars. You'd ship your stuff and the rest of us could go to the devil for all you cared."

"You can't talk to me like that," Brundage bellowed.

BEFORE the punchers knew what he was about he reached for the forty-five belted at his paunch. His hand came away like the gun was hot. He was staring into the muzzle of the Colt Verne Strand had tipped up in his holster.

"I wouldn't try that, Brundage," the Katy foreman warned. "I'm not much for gunplay. But if you want it that way you can have it. Katy stuff was choked all summer while your cattle wallowed deep in water. As for shrinkage your critters weighs pounds to our ounces—all because of water. So for once, Katy stuff is movin' first. And just what are you goin' to do about it?"

"I'll have you blackballed, that's what!" Brundage thundered. "Have you run out of the country. You talk about water. Haven't I let you water at my Anchor springs?"

"On the overflow your stuff wasted," Verne snorted. "Now we're—"

A moan halted him. Old Kit had groped out blindly for the building, sunk to his knees. Before they could reach him he pitched face downward in the dirt. Verne lifted him into the shade. "Get doc, quick!" he ordered the startled punchers. "Fetch water. The heat and this chewin' match has got him." He straightened up, whirled on Brundage.

"You knew his heart's been bad for months," he lashed out. "And you had to come around with your yawpin' when he's all in from the roundup. If anythin' happens to him, Brundage, I'll wipe up Buzzard Basin with you."

"I didn't do nothin'!" Brundage yelled furiously. "I ain't to blame."

"You're to blame for all the trouble in this country for the last twenty years. You've made it tough for him just like you have for everybody else. You think you're some sort of a god. Nobody's had the sand to knock over your cobpile and see what's underneath. Well, I have, Brundage!" He came back muscles taut, bulging beneath his faded shirt.

Big Cy backed away. "I'll fence the Anchor springs!" he bawled. "Never another drop of water will the Katy outfit get."

"Fence and be hanged," Verne threw back recklessly. "To the devil with you and your water. If we can't get weather without it, we'll—"

"What's the matter?" the voice of a girl broke in.

Verne whirled. She stepped between him and the muttering Brundage. A young and lovely auburn-haired girl with large brown eyes and smooth, tanned skin. She looked cool and dainty in a sheer white dress and floppy, wide-brimmed hat.

"What is it?" she demanded, her glance going from one to the other of the two men.

"Nothin' much, Van," Verne told her. "Only Uncle Kit there—" He pointed to the still figure stretched beside the building.

"Is he—is he dead?" She dropped to her knees, lifted the grizzled head in her arms. "Uncle Kit!"

"The sun was too much for him," Verne offered lamely.

"This is no place for you, Vanetta," Brundage told the girl gruffly.

"No place for me?" she cried. "When Uncle Kit Thornton is ill!" She turned furiously on the cowboys. "Do something! Don't just stand there."

"One of the boys is after water," Verne said. "Doc will be here in a minute."

"Here, lift him up," she ordered.

"Gently," as strong arms laid hold of old Kit. "Take him to my room in the hotel. You'll probably meet the doctor on the way. I'll be right over."

SHE watched them carry the old cowman down the street toward the Nakota House. Then she turned back to Brundage and Verne. "Now I want to know what's wrong?" she insisted.

"He just got overheated," Brundage growled.

"That isn't all."

"Well, there was a chewin' match," Verne admitted reluctantly.

"Come along, Vanetta." Brundage took her by the arm.

"Aren't you coming, Verne?" she asked.

"Never mind." Brundage started to push her along. "You're goin' to the ranch."

She pulled away from him. "I'm not going to the ranch, Father. I'm going to take care of Uncle Kit right here in Nakota."

"You're not!" Brundage flared. "And from this day on we're through with the Thorntons and everybody connected with them."

"Are you crazy?" the girl cried. "Uncle Kit has been your best friend ever since I can remember. Why, Verne and I grew up together."

"The Flyin' Anchor and the Katy are quits!" Brundage snarled. "And before I get through with that outfit I'll teach 'em it doesn't pay to hog empties at shippin' time." He strode away, half-dragging the protesting girl.

From that day on Buzzard Basin was torn with strife. True to his word, hot-headed Cy Brundage did everything he could to make life miserable for the Katy outfit. Those who remained loyal to old Kit Thornton tried to talk with Cy but he remained stubbornly adamant. For the first time he had been crossed in Buzzard Basin. That seemed to warp his reason. Ranchers who did not openly swear allegiance to the Flying Anchor immediately were blacklisted. He had declared a fight to the finish, and there seemed little chance the Katy could hold out against the powerful Brundage and his mighty Flying Anchor.

For days after the beef roundup Uncle Kit Thornton hovered between life and death. For weeks it was a grim and almost hopeless battle. But winter found him still waging a half-hearted fight.

"His heart is just tired out," the doctor told Verne one day when a blizzard was lashing Buzzard Basin. "It's only his fighting spirit that keeps him going. If only he'd quit worrying over—" The misery in the dull eyes of old Kit stopped him. They knew what was always on the mind of the loyal old cowman—knew how he suffered in the knowledge that in the face of death he had been deserted by his closest friend, Cy Brundage. And never once did Brundage come near the Katy. Instead, he boasted he would drive old Kit from the range as he had driven others.

For a time after the incident in Nakota, Verne Strand had avoided Vanetta Brundage, but the determined girl finally took matters into her own hands and rode to the Katy ranch. After that she became a regular visitor. The love between her and Verne was no secret. They had been pals from childhood. Everyone in Buzzard Basin took it for granted they would marry. They expected to themselves, long had planned it. The violent opposition of Brundage now only drew them closer.

In spite of Cy's orders that she have nothing more to do with Verne she contrived to meet him often. Their favorite trysting place was at Anchor springs, on the Flying Anchor, a mile below the Katy. Here they spent stolen moments together in the shelter of a cottonwood grove, hemmed in by precipitous gumbo walls. The only entrance to the small box canyon was from the north, toward the Katy.

THIS was but a defile barely wide enough for a horse to enter alongside deep-rutted Anchor creek, which ended in a large pool, that also was fed by

underground springs. And here was the bludgeon Cy Brundage wielded over Buzzard Basin. For when drought reduced the creek to a trickle, the pool held ample water for all the neighboring ranchers.

Spring came with a blasting sun that withered grass shoots as they pushed through the ground. By calf roundup —from which Brundage had succeeded in having the Katy blackballed—the range was seared and brown and dead, the heat insufferable. By late June drought lay like a scourge on Buzzard Basin. The blistering wind that fanned like flame across the torrefied flats whipped dust from dried up waterholes while gaunt, thirsty cattle prowled the arid wastes, bawling piteously.

It was a bitter time for young Verne Strand. Flying Anchor riders, under orders from Brundage, turned back every Katy they could from Anchor springs. They harassed him at every turn. His men rode constantly driving cattle that could not travel into the home ranch for water. But even then the meager supply was inadequate. He cudgeled his brain for a solution. There was bound to be one. But what was it?

Old Kit by now was in a wheelchair, where, the doctor said, he would remain. Verne cared for him like a baby, humoring him, gratifying every whim. Each day he rolled him out onto the porch of the rambling old ranchhouse. But old Kit knew the truth as he gazed across his blazing acres. And it began to worry him.

"We'll get through somehow," Verne tried to reassure him. "We've been waterin' at Anchor springs so far." He had never told old Kit of Brundage's threats, of his constant harassment. He did not tell him now that thirsty Katy cattle were being turned away from Anchor springs. "What do flood rights amount to, Uncle Kit?" he asked.

"Nothin' in a country where it never rains." Old Kit sighed. "Why?"

"Oh, I ran across some papers rummagin' through your desk the other night. You own the flood rights to the ravines and draws runnin' into Anchor creek."

"Been so long ago I'd forgot," old Kit admitted. "Cy had me file on them one time. He had some trouble with a nester over water. The fellow owned the flood rights to Anchor creek. Cy's wife—Vanetta's mother—had the first water rights, her original homestead bein' what's now the Flyin' Anchor home ranch. Came a dry year, the nester threw up a dam and filled it with Anchor creek water. Cy raised cain. The nester took it to court, claimin' as long as he'd let Cy use his flood water without hollerin', he figured he had water comin' when he needed it."

"Did he make it stick?" Verne asked quickly.

"Yes. But courts didn't mean much in those days. Cy just tossed a charge of dynamite into the dam. The nester starved out and left. I filed on his flood rights. But listen here, you aren't aimin' to—"

"Don't worry about what I'm aimin' to do. Gettin' well is your job." Verne walked away toward the barn.

"Don't build any dam," old Kit threw after him. "It's bad enough havin' Cy down on us without that."

But Verne was out of earshot. And in less than an hour he had gathered his men. He selected a damsite in the mouth of a wide ravine a hundred yards from Anchor creek and out of sight of the Katy ranchhouse. He set the crew working with teams and a slip. Then he hooked up a buckboard. He told Uncle Kit they needed supplies and headed for Nakota for dynamite.

He returned the following day with the explosives. He stacked the boxes at the end of the dam. He scooped out earth, pushed the sack of caps underneath, covering them with dirt. He showed the men where he had placed the caps and warned them to caution. Then he rode away toward the box canyon, hoping Vanetta would be there, waiting. On a hogback he pulled rein. New wire slashed the heat haze like threads of silver. Cy Brundage had fenced Anchor springs!

ANGER boiled Verne's blood. His first impulse was to ride to the Flying Anchor and beat Brundage to a pulp, but he quickly realized the folly of such action. He stifled his anger, let down the new wire gate, rode through the defile into the canyon. There he found Vanetta waiting.

"Looks like it's all over but the shoutin'," he said bitterly, dismounting and dropping down beside her to stretch out on his back. "Our critters can't last long now your father's fenced Anchor springs. I don't care for myself. But Uncle Kit will cash in. Isn't there some way to make Cy understand he's killin' the old fellow, that after thirty years of bein' friends, Uncle Kit is grievin' his heart out?"

"I've tried everything, Verne," she said sadly, stroking his damp hair. "Father gets more obstinate every day. It's a mania with him now. Way down in his heart he'd give anything to have things as they used to be. But he's too stubborn to admit it. Just because he's fenced the springs, though, is no sign you're whipped."

"I'd like to know what you'd call it, Van?"

"If you'd only listen to me—" she began impatiently.

"I want to listen to you," he cut in. "That's the trouble. I want to listen too badly. I'm crazy to marry you. Always have been. Sure, it would be the easy way out for me. But what about you? We just can't get married Van, with your father dead set against it. It would only cause you more grief."

"But father will never fight me."

"I'm not so sure about that. 'Specially if you married me. He'd whip us somehow. Like he's whipped the Katy and every other spread that ever crossed him. We just can't do it, Van. There may be some way out. I can't see it now." He turned away from the doubt in her eyes. "I've got the boys workin' on a flood dam, figurin' I might—"

"A dam!" she cried, springing up. "That's it! Why didn't I think of it before?"

"But my dam's illegal. Cy owns the water rights to Anchor creek."

"He does not. Mother left those rights to me. I own the Flying Anchor home ranch and everything that goes with it. It was mother's homestead."

"The flood rights belong to the Katy."

"Why worry then? I'll give you permission to put in a dam. And I'll let you fill it from Anchor creek."

"That's mighty white of you, Van." Verne smiled wanely. "But I won't let you get into this ruckus."

"Try and stop me!" she challenged. "I'm not afraid of father. And I'm not going to stand by and see anyone whip you down if I can help it."

"You're sweet," he told her. "But this is a man's fight. I'll go to your father, ask him—"

"You will not," she interrupted him emphatically. "I've tried every argument I know to convince father he's wrong. Now I'm going to make him see it my way. And I'm going to use my water rights to do it." She pecked his forehead with a kiss, ran to her horse. "So long," she called back as she galloped away. "You finish that dam or I—"

The rest of her words were lost as she rode into the defile.

But to spare her further grief Verne refused to go ahead with the dam. Next morning he ordered the Katy men to stop work.

"The dynamite will be all right where it is until I can cart it back to town," he said. "Don't any of you touch those caps. I'll take care of them the first time I'm down there."

HE WENT on to the house. "I'm goin' to town to talk over these flood rights with a lawyer," he told Uncle Kit. "They must be good for somethin'."

"Only if it rains," old Kit said glumly. "But find out. At least, we'll know how we're sittin'. How long will you be gone?" His voice was anxious.

"Two days. Maybe three. You'll be all right. Be sure and keep an eye on things for me."

For all his helplessness the old fellow

beamed with importance.

Verne was scarcely out of sight when Vanetta Brundage galloped into the Katy. Old Kit was amazed at the relief she made no effort to conceal when she found Verne had gone to Nakota. She seemed even more relieved when he told her Verne would be away two or three days.

"Uncle Kit," she said, "I own the water rights to Anchor creek. You own the flood rights. We're going to team up and build a dam here on the Katy. It will give you all the water you need and be an emergency supply for us."

"I've wanted Cy to do that for years," old Kit said. "How come he's changed his mind?"

She sidestepped an answer, refused to meet his gaze. "Have we your permission to go ahead then?" she asked.

"Sure. And any papers or contracts—"

"Will be between you and me. The Flying Anchor boys are pretty busy, Uncle Kit. I may have to depend on your men to do the work."

"Anythin' on the ranch is yours, Van. Help yourself."

"Thanks," she said and rode away.

Three days later Verne Strand returned from Nakota. He caught his first glimpse of Vanetta Brundage's dam, partly filled with water from a ridge above the Katy. It angered him to think the Katy crew had deliberately ignored his orders, yet he was elated at sight of the gaunt Katy cattle straggling in from every direction. He galloped to the ranch and up to the porch where Uncle Kit sat in his wheelchair.

"Who built that dam?" he demanded.

"Vanetta and I," old Kit said proudly. "It's a pool arrangement between the Katy and the Flyin' Anchor. Do you suppose Cy is aimin' to stop feudin'?"

"Where's Van?" Verne interrupted.

"Left just a little while ago. Said if you got back before sundown to meet her at Anchor springs. She—" But Verne already was on his way to the dam.

The Katy foreman forgot his anger as he sat his horse watching the thirsty cattle revelling belly-deep in the muddy water. For the first time in weeks the oppressive weight of worry was gone from him. He felt like shouting. Whatever the consequences, for the moment the problem was solved. But only for a moment. For as he reined about he sighted Cy Brundage riding toward him at furious speed.

"What right have you got to build a dam on Anchor creek?" Brundage thundered, setting his horse on its haunches.

"It isn't on Anchor creek," Verne answered. "Besides, I didn't—" He caught himself in time to protect Vanetta. "It's a hundred yards from the creek."

"But you're usin' creek water to fill it. The creek's dry below. The Flyin' Anchor owns these water rights."

"The Katy owns the flood rights."

THE enraged rancher shook his fists in the air.

"But this isn't flood water," Brundage bawled. "It's creek water. You're goin' to cut that dam and let the water come on down or—"

"It's built now," Verne interrupted him coldly. "And it's goin' to stay."

"We'll see about that." Brundage's voice was savage. "I'll give you until noon tomorrow. You cut it by then or I will."

"Don't do anything foolish, Brundage," Verne warned. "There's a limit to what a man'll take. I've held in for Uncle Kit's sake, thinkin' you'd come to your senses. But you won't. You're trespassin' on Katy property. Ride!" He stood in his stirrups, one hand on his gun, face grim and hard.

"If that dam isn't cut by noon tomorrow I'll dynamite it!" Brundage roared.

"You want to do it from the air then. Don't set a foot on Katy land."

Brundage whirled his horse, pounded away.

Verne rode into the box canyon, grim-faced, steely-eyed. Vanetta ran to meet him. She threw herself into his arms as he dismounted.

"Oh, Verne, father's found out about

us meeting here." She hid her face on his shoulder. "He's sending me away—threatened me if I ever see you again. Please, can't we get married?"

He shook his head. "It would never work, Van. Not until things are straightened out."

"But I want to stay here."

"And have more trouble all the time? There's goin' to be plenty of fireworks over that dam."

"I only wanted to help you. I thought —Oh, Verne, won't you please keep me here?"

"I'd like to more than anythin' else in the world, Van." He held her tightly, patted her shoulder. "But I just had a run-in with your father. He swears if that dam isn't cut by noon tomorrow, he'll dynamite it."

She tore away from him, stood white, trembling. "If he does, I'll—" Tears came in a flood.

"He won't." He comforted her awkwardly. "Because I'm goin' to beat him to it. I'm goin' to dynamite it before he finds out you built it."

"You can't!" she said furiously. "It means everything to the Katy. It may mean Uncle Kit's life." She seized hold of his arm, shook him fiercely. "That's my dam, do you understand? Mine and Uncle Kit's. I'd like to see you or anybody else blow it up." She backed away, eyes blazing. "I've tried everything to end this silly feuding. Everybody but Uncle Kit is against me. Because you're all a bunch of cowards. And I'm warning you, Verne Strand! Let that dam alone!"

"Van!" he cried, bewildered by her outburst. "I was only thinkin' of you. What if your father found out?"

"Who cares?" recklessly. "I'll tell him myself. I've stood all I'm going to from him. And from you, too. I'll tell him just like I'm telling you. Don't touch that dam!" Before he could stop her she sprang onto her horse, was racing away toward the entrance.

Verne sat for a time, staring across the box canyon. Vanetta's fury, Brundage's threat to dynamite the dam, all he had endured since that day in Nakota, suddenly found him numb, helpless. His mind churned with crazy impulses. In a daze he got his horse, loped back to the Katy.

VERNE rode to the dam the following morning. Out of a night of sleepless tossing had come a determination to demolish it, protect Vanetta despite her defiant stand, regardless of the cost. Scarcely knowing what he was about he retrieved the sack of dynamite caps. Then he thought of the cattle. He placed the caps on the boxes of dynamite, set to rounding up the animals. He drove the reluctant brutes away from the water. When he finally succeeded in moving them to safety he started back toward the dynamite cache. A hoarse shout brought him about. Cy Brundage, gun in hand, was riding down upon him. The cowman's face was ghastly. A wild light gleamed in his eyes. Words spilled from him like the babblings of a crazy person. He cursed Verne furiously.

"You've coaxed Vanetta away from me!" he bawled. Throwing himself from his horse, he ran toward Verne who sat his saddle, dumfounded.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Verne said coldly.

"Where's Vanetta?" Brundage bellowed.

"I haven't seen her. I don't know."

"I'll make you talk!" Brundage's forty-five swung up, cracked. Verne's horse shied violently. Dust obscured him. Brundage came on, roaring, face contorted.

"She left a note sayin' she'd never come back to the Flyin' Anchor except as your wife. She'll never marry you. I'll kill you first." The forty-five flashed again. Cornered now, Verne's own gun swung up, but he never pulled the trigger. Brundage's wild bullet had found the dynamite caps!

A deafening explosion rocked the earth. Mountains of dirt upheaved about them. Showers of rock came crashing down. Brundage stumbled to his knees. Blood spurted from a gash in his head.

"Vanetta!" the cowman croaked. "She's in the box canyon. For God's sake, save her!"

The dam gave way with the roar of a gigantic thunderclap. Impounded water, suddenly released, leaped and stumbled. It choked gullies and ravines, pitched in mighty rollers down Anchor creek toward the box canyon.

The box canyon! Vanetta! Trapped with but one way of escape, the narrow gorge through which the water would thunder. Verne jerked his horse about, gave it rein, and was gone in a burst of furious speed. He had no time to think of Brundage. Vanetta was all that mattered. Vanetta must be made safe from the wall of water pitching along behind him.

The entrance to the box canyon came in view, and the wire gate, built by hatred. He cursed Brundage as he struggled with the fastening. But the cowman probably had perished, victim of his own madness. Then he was on his horse again, racing along, water roaring at his heels. He began shouting for Vanetta. His words were lost in the frenzied world about him.

He reached the defile, pulled his feet from the stirrups, as his madly running horse shot through a few feet ahead of the churning flood.

Then he saw Vanetta, mounted, coming toward him.

"Ride to the far end," he shouted.

She was quick to catch his meaning. She whirled her horse, sent it racing down the canyon. Verne dared a glance behind. The narrowness of the gorge had checked the rush of water, given them a momentary respite.

He raced alongside of Vanetta, lifted her from her saddle as they reached the farthest canyon wall.

"Climb up on my shoulders," he ordered.

SHE obeyed him without question. Muscles strained to bursting as he lifted her dead weight to stand upright in his saddle.

"Grab hold of somethin'," he panted. "Is there anything?"

"There's a narrow ledge," she said jerkily. "But I believe it's wide enough for us to squeeze onto. What happened?"

"The dam went out."

She clutched hold of a projecting clump of brush, pulled herself up onto the ledge.

"You dynamited it," she accused. "I heard the explosion."

"No, I didn't." He dropped down into his saddle, undid his rope with nervous fingers.

The water had reached his horse's belly, was rising rapidly. But the gorge had broken its pitching fury. The box canyon was a swirling mill pond. He calmed the nervous pony, again raised upright in the saddle.

"Make the rope fast to that brush," he told her. "I'll try and come up it."

She looped the rope about the brush. He eased his weight upon it. The brush sagged. A cry escaped her. She leaned over dangerously on her perilous perch, clinging to the rope.

"Be careful," he puffed, coming up, hand over hand. "If it gives you'll come too."

She screamed. The brush started tearing loose, teetered on the edge of the ledge. Verne threw himself forward. He got a hold on slaterock, then clawed his way up beside her.

"Whew!" he gasped. "That was a close shave."

He raised up cautiously hugging the side-wall, looked above. The wall rose sheerly for a good twenty-five feet without so much as a projecting hand hold. They were trapped on the ledge!

"We'll just have to sit here and see what happens," he told her grimly. But he didn't tell her of his fear that there was no escape.

"What difference does it make what happens? We'll be together," she said quietly.

"I'll say we will." He eased back down beside her, took her hand. "Forever—Mrs. Strand. I guess I've been foolish and bullheaded, Van. But it was only because I wanted to protect you. Now they can all go to the devil—

just so I have you."

She smiled up at him. Scarcely daring to move on their narrow perch they could only sit, close together, hand in hand. The moment was too blissful for thought of danger. Then suddenly he shouted:

"Look, Van! The water's goin' down." She, too, stared in amazement. The water no longer was swirling into the canyon. And it had receded until it was little more than fetlock deep on their horses.

He slid from the ledge to the slimy canyon floor, stretched up his arms to her. She came down into them. He held her closely, kissed her while she clung to him. Then he carried her to her horse, lifted her into the saddle.

"What do you suppose happened to the flood water?" He voiced the question that mystified him.

"Why worry about it as long as it isn't chasing us?" she smiled. "We're safe. And—" shyly "—we've finally found one another."

He set a swift pace out of the defile through which only a trickle of water now was running. He pulled rein on a hogback above the Katy.

"Well, what do you know about that!" he blurted out. "Look, Van. When that dynamite—"

"What dynamite?" she interrupted him.

HE TOLD her quickly, then pointed below. A yawning hole blasted by the explosion was brimming with water. Water gushed over its rim, poured down a ravine, tumbled along through the barnyard of the Katy.

"That explosion must have uncovered new springs," Verne cried excitedly. "It changed the course of Anchor Creek. That's what checked the flood. There's a new creek running through the Katy barnyard. Do you know what this means, Van? The Katy has all the water it needs!" He galloped on toward the ranch, the girl's horse racing beside him.

Then he remembered Cy Brundage. He dreaded to tell her, but it had to be done. He put it off until they reached the Katy, rode up to the porch. Old Kit came rolling through the doorway in his wheelchair. At sight of them he yelled with all his old-time vigor.

Verne leaped down. "Don't shout like that," he warned. "You'll have a relapse."

"I'll howl myself to death thankin' the Lord you two are safe," the old fellow bellowed. "I was scared you were goners. Cy said you might be."

"Where is father?" Vanetta cried.

Verne steeled himself for old Kit's answer.

"Where do you suppose?" the old fellow chuckled. "Inside there, restin'. He was hurt when the dam blew up. Not bad, not bad," he reassured Vanetta. "Just a little bunged up by a rock. But he knew where to come—where he always used to come when he needed help. Down here to me and the Katy."

Verne, too, felt like shouting. Vanetta threw herself into his arms to sob on his shoulder.

"Did you see all the water we've got, Uncle Kit?" Excitement cracked Verne's voice.

"Yeah, but we don't need it." For the first time in months old Kit was rubbing his hands together gleefully. "Before I put Cy to sleep with a pint of drinkin' liquor, he said that if the Lord would forgive him and let you two come back unharmed he'd give you the Flyin' Anchor for a weddin' present. So hunt yourselves a preacher and let's get you married. Invite all the folks in Buzzard Basin. By gosh, if I don't set fire to this wheelchair contraption and dance at the weddin'."

"But where will father live?" Vanetta was laughing in spite of her tears.

"He's goin' to stay here where he belongs," old Kit said. "Us two old codgers is goin' to run the Katy together. Like we did before you kids come along."

■

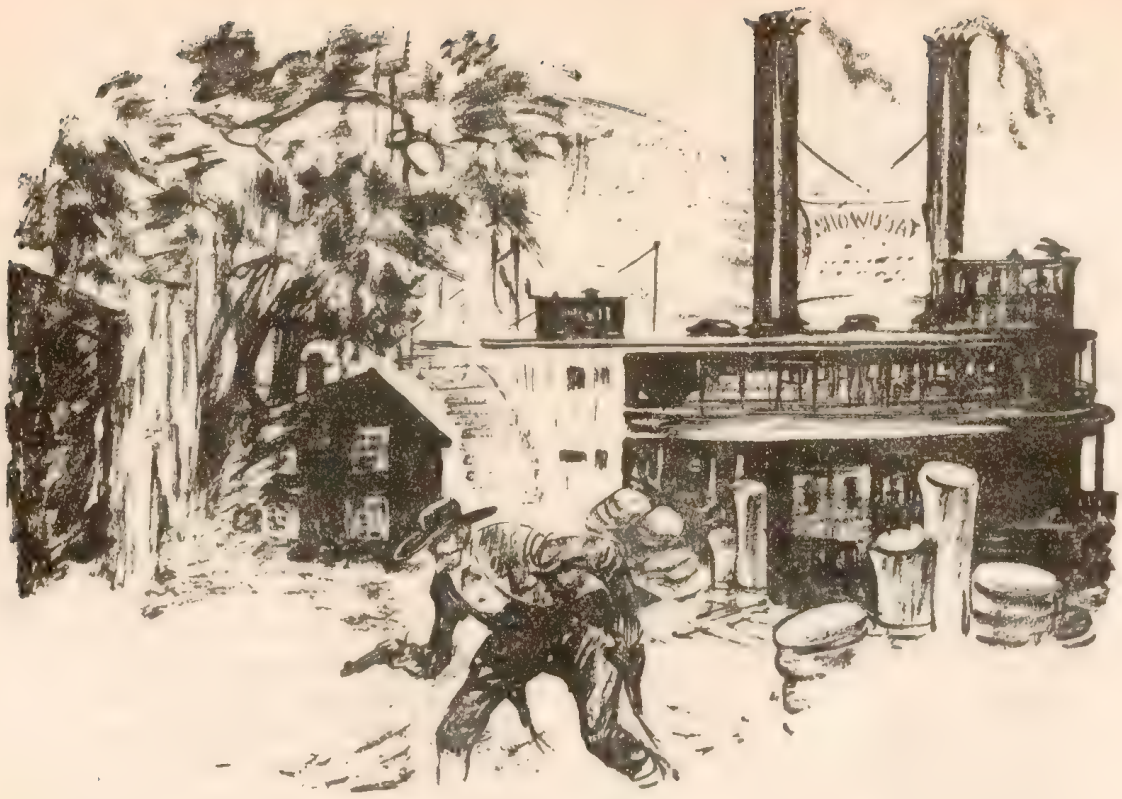
Coming Next Issue: BOOTS, AND NO MISTAKE, *by BEN FRANK*

A NOVELET OF THE FRONTIER

by

NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

Cavell whirled and fired, coolly aware that he had turned his back upon another enemy



LAW FOR A BOOMTOWN

BOURK DONOHUE was a handsome man whose thick, cherry-red hair was streaked sparsely with gray, but his cold profile still reminded old-timers of the man who, twenty years before, had assassinated a president.

There clung to him a certain elegance as well as arrogance, and he might well have been an actor, but along the new Western frontier, Thespians had still to win to high regard.

Besides, Bourk Donohue, proprietor of the most pretentious resort in the river town of Mammoth Bend on the Trinity, had other interests.

Principally, he wanted to make and keep Mammoth Bend big and important and respected, for all its present rawness, for he meant to grow with it and have a big part in its future. That he was a gambling house owner, was of little moment. A man could be a man, no matter what his profession in the growing Southwest.

Looking up and down the dusty street now, cool-eyed, he saw the trouble he had expected—and went to meet it. It was Bourk Donohue's way.

He headed in the direction of the small jail, significantly empty, and accommodating at most no more than a dozen prisoners. The building also housed the county clerk's office as well as the cobweb-draped office which the

When corruption stalks Mammoth Bend, candidate Tony Cavell takes up arms against a crooked gang conspiring to steal the election!

sheriff and town marshal shared. As Donohue approached he saw, plastered on the outer wall of the jail, a big new poster which challenged raw yellow sunlight. He saw Anthony Cavell, his own choice for prosecuting attorney, stop to read it.

It attracted any eye, but Donohue could not know how much one name stood out.

The poster read:

SUPERIOR ENGAGEMENT!
FREE! FREE TO ALL! FREE!
Denyse Brieux Attended by a
Superb Company
Fresh from Triumphs in New Orleans,
Biloxi and Atlanta
FREE!
COME ONE! COME ALL!
Courtesy of and Welcome From
BEN FOWLER
Chairman of Committee for Election
ARTHUR SPARKES
— for —
COUNTY ATTORNEY
DENYSE BRIEUX

Frowning a little, Tony Cavell turned away. That one name was in his thoughts as his slim frame quickened with recollection. Denyse Brieux! It wasn't her real name, of course, for she had told him so.

Hurriedly she had whispered that to him in New Orleans when he had told her he was going West. Eagerly he had told her his ambitions, how they were tied up with a raw new country just about to become a state, and that statehood had to be fought for. He was a lawyer, young, and not successful so far, so he had made up his mind he was going on. They had quarreled.

NOW—he brought up in the dazzling white sunshine of Mammoth Bend, staring. He had gone only three paces from the poster-playbill. Emotion played over his lean dark face, as he thought now of Denyse and how she had scorned his determined protests that a man could mold a great future in the new West that was just building up.

She had urged him to settle down in a Gulf Coast town and hang out his law shingle. But he had not—and so they had quarreled. But he had gone on.

So greatly now had the name, Denyse Brieux, affected him that for a space he did not comprehend the real significance of the poster which bore her name. Then it hit him. The showboat company would be his enemies. And Donohue's!

Ben Fowler who was staking the election eve entertainment of the showboat company was the enemy of them both! And the company would be performing in behalf of Ben Fowler's hand-picked candidate for county attorney, Arthur Sparkes. All anyone really knew of Sparkes was that he had been a legal assistant in the office of the last prosecuting attorney, Champ Coughlin, when Coughlin, refusing to heed warnings from the river-boat element, had gone down to a bullet-hot death in his own courtroom.

The whole county knew the shooting had been the work of Fowler's gang and yet there had been no one to prosecute. Judge White Bledsoe was honest to the core, but old, and Bledsoe, courageous as he was, had had no law with teeth in it to back him. Ben Fowler, owner of the Aces Up Saloon *was* the law.

So now a new election was coming up and Tony Cavell, himself a candidate, knew that he was facing a bitter, ruthless enemy. That had been enough, but now this! Denyse Brieux!

She was due here aboard the showboat this afternoon at the latest, in order to take part in a special show for the Fowler faction. She was to help elect Sparkes district attorney on the Fowler ticket to succeed Coughlin!

At the edge of the board sidewalk he

turned back, regarding the poster once more. Something in the picture of her, gaudy as it was, could not fail to remind him of the girl he had known in New Orleans. He remembered what she had told him when he had been in a gun fight, just before he had set out for the West.

"Guns and gunpowder will never solve men's problems, Anthony," she had said. "You're too quick to take offense, too quick to make use of that gun skill of yours. Remember, when you go West, your future is as a lawyer, not as a gunhand!"

He had gone. So had she, with her touring company. He had not heard from her again, busy with his new life, as she undoubtedly had been with her own. So although he had never managed to forget the image of Denyse Brieux, he had forgotten there was such a thing as the Gulf States Pride Entourage Company, a showboat—until the poster recalled it.

Now, however, was no time for reminiscing. Election Day, even the hour, was too close, and the main street of Mammoth Bend on the Trinity was seething. There was free liquor for the asking from the Fowler machine. The crews from five river boats thronged the streets and strangers from off the newest Gulf steamer pushed among the crowds. And with this new move of Fowler's about the showboat, Cavell decided he should see Donohue—and soon. So he started along the street toward the Last Oasis Bar & Palace, Donohue's place of business.

He scarcely noticed the men who shouldered into him. The name of Denyse Brieux was on his lips, soundless there, and his face was drawn as remembrance of her face and voice overwhelmed him.

A snarl came at his elbow and he turned with a clouded look in his gray eyes.

HE RECOGNIZED one of Fowler's henchmen. A lank man with stained brown teeth, deadly of eye, wispy mustached—Seth Braydon. Braydon had stopped to leer at him and the man's squinted eyes held threat. Behind Braydon was another of Fowler's gunslingers.

Cavell frowned, instinctively backing to the wall behind him.

"Beg pardon," he said, with a kind of distracted politeness.

Braydon chortled. "Pardon, he says. With his eyes full of that playbill and the dancehall angel they advertise! She ain't for you, Cavell! What d'yuh think Ben Fowler had her brought in here for?"

"Runnin' for Prosecutin' Attorney he is!" Braydon's companion chuckled. "Him and Donohue, and that old corpse, Jedge Bledsoe, they aim on cleanin' up the river. But it still takes Ben Fowler to draw the doxies in when he wants to give the mavericks the come-hither!"

Tony Cavell turned, his eyes suddenly holding a peculiar blankness. He stared for a second at the man who was speaking, his eyes slid over Braydon, then became opaque.

"You're chokin' on that one, hombre!" he said, his lips barely moving. Forgetting that he was known for his gun-speed, for pistol mastery that had served him well in this last Western outpost, though at the moment he wore only a small double-barreled derringer in his waistcoat pocket, he lashed out with his fists.

His right fist caught the boasting man in the teeth. The fellow staggered, groped for his gun, swaying backward, and as the spur on his right boot caught in the edge of the board sidewalk, Braydon came roaring in.

Cavell whirled in the same instant, blind to the crowd already pushing in. Wild as the town was, wild as turbulent Trinity and its cargoes had made it, a

fight was always a fight. And a battle in the middle of the afternoon—and outdoors—could bring men on the run.

Braydon came in head down and Cavell's left fist caught him high in the chest just below his thick neck. The blow knocked Braydon's wind from him, and he reeled a little. But he was a big man and a seasoned fighter. He came weaving in again, both his long hairy arms windmilling, his eyes ugly with killer fire.

His flailing right grazed the side of Cavell's head and knocked off the lawyer's wide white sombrero. Cavell staggered, but came up, and his right again drove out, coming this time from close to the sidewalk.

It buried itself in Braydon's broad body above the belt and Braydon vented an anguished "Oughff!" He swayed back. Cavell, absently wiping at a thick runnel of blood coursing down his cheek, turned to face the other man who was just getting to his knees from the gutter.

Someone in the gathered crowd yelled, "Yippee—crowd 'em, Reb!" and sunlight glinted off the barrel of a short .44, filed down. It leveled. Cavell gathered himself for the spring he knew would be too late.

A shot cracked, and he felt the wind of the bullet as it whined by his ear. Then the gun in front of him faded like a mirage and the man who had held it fell back. The crowd parted. It parted with something like respect. Perhaps reluctant respect, but it was there.

Bourk Donohue who had seen trouble coming, and had gone to meet it, moved in.

Donohue's bulk made his path. There was about him his usual unstudied air of careless elegance. For which most of the crowd knew him. They knew he had backed Anthony Cavell for Prosecuting Attorney, and that he was backing him now. Moreover, whether men were with him or against Donohue, they knew he was square—and they also knew he was a hard man to buck. Men eased back a little before the frosty chill in his blue eyes.

Accustomed to violence, in his own domain and elsewhere, Donohue gave scarcely a glance toward the victims of the fracas when he was finished with them. He looked Cavell over quickly, grinned a little, picked up the lawyer's hat and handed it to him.

"Let's wander along to my casa," he said. "We got a couple of things to talk about. One of those *pelados* is still alive enough to take back the news to Fowler about what happened. The other'n 'll make good fertilizer in Boot Hill."

Cavell kept silent. Donohue was going to ask him the cause of the altercation. He knew he wouldn't tell, though he liked Donohue. He couldn't tell even Donohue about—Denyse.

The bulge of the derringer at his waist reminded him that he wanted to be rid of derringers. What was the use of fooling with such toys when he could use a gun, a real gun? She knew that—Denyse knew!

And then the whole thing was starting all over again.

II

DONOHUE maintained quarters known, or rumored to be "elegant." They comprised the entire third and top floor of the Last Oasis. But few residents of the Bend had ever reported on them at first hand. Sam Calder, a crusty old Gulf pilot and captain of the river boat due today as a showboat, was one of the few. Judge Bledsoe was known to have been there, before he relinquished most of his activities in the town.

Folks said Lisbeth Aiken, proprietor of a restaurant and boarding house had been there, and this was likely, since

Lisbeth had once dealt faro at the Oasis. It was even suggested that since Donohue's games were known to be on the square, it wasn't likely Lisbeth had been able to go into business for herself with her savings.

Donohue lounged down behind a desk table and pushed forward a brass tray on which stood fresh lemons, two square brown bottles, ice and water in a pitcher. He motioned Cavell to a chair.

Cavell waited for him to speak. Donohue bit off part of a thin stogy, tossed the end away, lit what remained and took the first puff of smoke before he did speak.

"Feel like tellin' me about it?" he said then.

Cavell said, "No," and Donohue nodded.

"Let's understand each other then," he said carefully. "From the look I saw on your face the trouble was either a woman or a personal insult. A woman?"

"It could have been," Cavell admitted.

Donohue's eyes, slatier even than Cavell's own, narrowed.

"And it happened right in front of that poster advertising the showboat troupe!" he said musingly. "You wouldn't happen to know anybody on that boat of Cap'n Sam Calder's, would you? On the *Luna Maid?*"

Cavell shook his head. "Not by name anyway."

Donohue considered that. After a silence he lifted his glass once, set it down, then said:

"We're not foolin' one another, Cavell. Best we understand that. I checked on yuh, long before I decided yuh was the man decent citizens wanted in there. And I backed yuh. The fact is, yuh're the devil on wheels with a shootin' iron. A killer, I've heard, even if yuh never aimed to be."

There was a pause, during which Cavell did not stir a muscle.

"That's why yuh left New Orleans, I hear," Donohue went on. "But still yuh're a lawyer and a good one. Same like Andy Jackson, and he had duels, too, and used irons. Yuh've got a derringer in yore pocket right now. But yuh refuse to pack a six-gun. Want to talk?"

"No," Cavell said.

"Why'd yuh tackle Fowler's gunnies today? Yuh knew well enough they was baitin' yuh."

"I knew." Cavell nodded. "But I didn't like what they said."

"About what?"

Cavell's eyes narrowed. "Mebbe you know," he retorted. "If you don't, I won't tell you. You're backin' me, Donohue—that's all. Mebbe you know we're due to lose tomorrow."

"Not if yuh don't let lead inside yuh. Not if we can keep yuh out of the hands of their crooked law."

Cavell got to his feet. He was tall, and lithe and strong, and in the semi-gloom of Donohue's quarters there was something indefinably fine about him. It was not in his chin or the way his eyebrows slanted upward over gray eyes, not in the width of his shoulders. It was something that seemed to shine from inside him. But he shook his head.

"We've got to leave it like that, Bourk," he said. "You're backing me for Prosecuting Attorney, like you said. I'm in to the finish. But my personal life, before I came here, that's my own. Thank you for getting there in time. They might have gunned me out. I'll remember. That's all I have to say." He stopped, met the cool eyes across from him. "Is it enough?"

Donohue took a little time to nod.

"Enough—for now," he finally said. "We'll win. But there'll be shootin', and a lot of it, first." He got to his feet, grinned. "Yuh mebbe don't need advice but I'm givin' yuh some. Get back yore guns, use 'em when yuh have too, and don't rely on yore derringers. The men

out to stop us use hoglegs and forty-fives. Anything else that comes handy! If we win tomorrow there's goin' to be an exodus of *hombres malos* like the Hegira in the Good Book—only it'll be of killers and scum who know they're losin' rule of the biggest piece of territory this side N'Orleans!"

ANTHONY Cavell went from the Last Oasis & Palace to find the street outside soft-hazed with the heat of mid-afternoon. As he made his way to his hotel without mishap, his head turned as he passed the spot where only a short time before he had stopped to regard a poster. Blood stained the edge of the sidewalk dark, but it did not show much.

Cavell occupied two rooms in the Gulfport Hotel, a quiet hotel in comparison with others in Mammoth Bend. He made his way to them without speaking to anyone.

Outside, the town still seethed noisily. From the hills men had been streaming in since early morning for the elections. A glance from his window, eye trailing the shifting crowds, showed him, even had he not heard the whistle, that the showboat bearing the theatrical troupe imported to help elect Fowler's men, had docked.

Sparkes, Fowler's candidate, was a nonentity and everyone in town knew it. However, he was a shrewd claim lawyer who had made a small reputation when the boom first began in town by taking on cases of debatable merit and winning most of them. Judge Bledsoe had thrown two of Sparkes' petitions out of court and a third one had earned him a stinging bench reprimand.

But Judge White Bledsoe, known in earlier days as "the hanging judge," was old and ailing now, and though he was known to be violently on the side of law and order, he was practically out of the fight.

Anthony Cavell stood for a long moment in the dim quiet of his own place, staring down at the holster hanging over the end of his narrow bed. His mind raced back to other days, but mostly he was wondering how Donohue had guessed so much of his past.

True it was that he had killed two men, in fair fight. And true it was that he had desperately wounded another. In New Orleans, a certain element knew of his prowess with a six-gun. He had even been forced into a duel at one time and had pinked his man carefully, but it was common knowledge that he had fired the last shot not to kill but to salvage a situation that had been no fault of his.

Even as a reputation as a killer, in which he had no interest, was snowballing, he had fled New Orleans. He still wondered at times whether it was Denyse Brieux's open scorn of his notoriety that had caused him to leave New Orleans or whether it was that he loathed a notoriety he had never courted. It was then he had foresworn his six-guns for his new life. But now—was it different?

Perhaps Donohue had merely been guessing. That was a possibility, of course, but Donohue was known to be in constant touch with New Orleans, across the Gulf, and he was no guessing man!

Tony Cavell found himself lifting the long .45 from its sheath, and his eyes darkened when he realized that his fingers and palm, moving over its surface, were almost caressing. He looked to its loads, spurred by the street sounds, and shoved the weapon back in place.

Then slowly he straightened. He had been given warning. He had been forced into this fight on the side of law and order and already it had nearly cost him his life. Fowler's imported gunnies were making red riot in the town, impressing neutrals with their power and despera-

tion. They had asked for it, Fowler and the rest.

Anthony Cavell found himself buckling the belt across his hips and easing the hammer back into place. He left it there, eyes glinting, while he went about shaving and changing his clothes with meticulous care. The derringer he left on the mantelpiece when he went out, and there was a renewed lightness in his step as he found the stairs.

He was taking a hand—against long odds. That was the way he liked it, he guessed, now that he had stopped long enough to think about it.

He would be elected District Attorney tomorrow or he wouldn't be—but he would have a fight, anyhow!

FOWLER'S mobs held the streets. Dusk had begun to settle. Tony Cavell emerged, slightly changed, though no one would have observed it—except maybe Donohue. Lights shone brightly from the bar across the street, and from the Last Oasis farther up. The only thing particularly noticeable since sundown was the increase of men along the streets, and the absence of women—except for the women who were always on the streets. They were very gay.

Boom territory! And new fortunes for the plucking! Rich territory, for good men or bad, depending on who should hold the reins of power after the morning's sun! Depending on who made law or upheld it!

The showboat had docked at the long wharf which was the pride of the river town, at the end of Oregon Street, and Tony Cavell headed for there. He knew Captain Sam Calder, owner and proprietor of the *Luna Maid* on the showboat run, otherwise simply a Gulf coast side-wheeler.

He liked Sam, even though Sam didn't cast a vote in this town. A vote cast by an outsider would hardly be noticed at that, however, since it was quite likely that the majority of Fowler's voters would be "repeaters."

A low light burned in Lisbeth's house as Cavell neared it. Lisbeth Aiken, everyone in town was aware, was not quite acceptable among the best people, principally because of her close association with Bourk Donohue. She maintained a large establishment where the only formalities required were ready cash, patent respectability, and a lack of obstreperousness.

River gamblers frequented her place but were always quiet there, and it was known that games for high stakes often went on into the early morning hours, long after Donohue's and Fowler's places had closed up. Fowler's handpicked marshal, Jules Dean, had tried to close her doors once or twice, but Dean had found he had less power than Donohue. Now whether Lisbeth would have to close or not hung in the balance until after the elections.

A half block before Cavell reached Lisbeth's place, where drooping elms and fragrant mimosas threatened the tall hats of passersby, a man stepped from shadow, between a small shack and a dilapidated old house used as a storage place for cinnabar men. Moonlight glinted down through leafage, glancing off gun muzzles. He heard a snarl and recognized a yelling voice behind him.

"Move in, Seth! That's him!"

The voice was that of "Cutty" Ramsdell, one of Fowler's men. The man in front must then be one of Fowler's newer imports, probably the Seth Braydon with whom Tony Cavell had tangled earlier. He hadn't been much injured in that fracas.

The soft night split apart with flame. Inside him, Tony Cavell was aware of a fiercely unreasoning surge of joy. The kind of combat he had been avoiding for so long was upon him at last!

In the lurid seconds following he

scarcely thought of his own peril. He scarcely took cognizance of the fact that this must be a trap, that these men without doubt had been dispatched by Fowler to eliminate him, that there were two of them, and that cold-blooded killing was their aim.

He saw Ramsdell's yellow-balled eyes in a flicker of starshine and his .45 came up to meet the blast of Ramsdell's gun. He felt lead whine past his wide hat brim and the song of it did no more than exhilarate him.

He whirled, aware instinctively of the accuracy of his first shot and aware, coolly, that his back was to another enemy. He dropped into a crouch, moving with a crabwise movement, as a second tongue of flame came at him from the gun at his rear.

III

THERE was cold fury in Tony Cavell's eyes then. He waited until flame cleared from before his vision. Then there was only the crimson glow to recall—that, and a formless shape.

He fired into the heart of where the glow had been and saw a figure go hurtling backward against the bole of a tree. He also saw a six-gun come clattering down on the boardwalk.

A shout came from up along the street. River breeze was in his nostrils as he whirled, recognizing that shout. "Killer marshal," some called Jules Dean, and a deadly foe. With Fowler's law backing him, the town marshal overruled the inconsequential sheriff, and his deputies held sway.

Cavell knew that if Dean caught him here, he would be accused of cold-blooded killing, and that promptly there would be a hanging. He also knew that Fowler had not cared a whit for the two gunmen he had sent out to trail him. He had reasoned that either way he stood to win—they would kill his enemy or else his enemy would be branded a killer and fair game. Lynch law still obtained and would obtain until after tomorrow, when the fates were due to cast the dice in the final game.

Fowler was playing for the highest stakes of his lifetime. If Cavell, backed by Donohue and the decent element, won his race for District Attorney, all the Fowler henchmen would become automatically outlawed, for Mammoth Bend on the morrow was casting its first vote as a state community.

Cavell already had the friendly ear of the aging but furiously honest Judge White Bledsoe, and there would be a quick cleanup. Indictments and trials would follow fast. Fowler stood to lose little, so long as he could afford to pay for his attempts to hang on to his power—and he could. But if he lost he lost everything.

Understanding of all this was in Tony Cavell's mind in a series of swift flashes as he heard Dean's voice, then, quickly following it, the snarl of the mob. Once before he had heard a mob's howl. It chilled a man's blood like nothing else. It was worse than even the chant of bloodhounds that have found their quarry, because it was human and animal too.

Donohue would have said to run. He ran.

The streets were all dark. He rounded the corner of the one he had chosen, making for the wharf where the showboat had tied up. She sighed sluggishly and listlessly at her moorings just beyond the end of the new breakwater. Freighters and broadhorns shouldered her.

Lights shone ahead. Ahead, too, were voices. Cavell halted. Again came the echo of the mob roar. He felt the old chill. Dying—he had no actual fear of dying in fight or battle, but facing the Eternal from the end of a lynch rope pulled by Fowler's hired gunhands was

something else. He ran on again, wanting a saddle under him, swerving off from the lights at the end of the jetty. They might be waiting for him there.

Abruptly he brought up, remembering that he had been intending to go to Lisbeth's house. He pulled off his wide hat and mopped his brow, drew a deep breath. Then, at an even, unhurried pace, he walked back over part of the way he had come, while the chase streamed off toward the jetty. He was unmolested, even though the mob roar was still in his ears, as he slid through the rear door of Lisbeth's.

Under a low hanging kerosene lamp which was suspended by chains from the kitchen ceiling, Lisbeth Aiken was a more than beautiful woman. She had an air of quiet graciousness, a dignity that would remain unimpaired by events storming past her, or by opinion. She was flaxen-haired and still young, with blue eyes and red lips.

As Cavell came in she sat facing two men. One of them was Bourk Donohue, a thin cigar clamped between his strong white teeth. The other was a man who boarded at her place when he piloted one boat or another into port—Captain Sam Calder—just now of the *Luna Maid,* showboat.

Calder's hair was iron-gray and his teeth tobacco-stained. There were deep lines in his face, and wrinkles about his blue eyes, deep-sunk, far-seeing eyes.

Donohue sat back and his chair creaked.

"Close that door—*y muy pronto!*" he said quietly.

CAVELL obeyed, then turned. He shook his head.

"I didn't care so much," he told Donohue. "I'm tired of running, and being shot at." Flame lit his eyes. "The general idea, you can take it, is that I want to do some shooting myself."

Donohue's eyes narrowed. "Seems to me," he said coolly, "I heard yuh been doin' some—right recent too." Yet there was a fighting man's admiration behind his calm.

"I did. It helped, maybe. That's why I'm here. Running from one of Fowler's mobs."

"Yuh figgered to find me here?"

"You've got it again."

Donohue nodded. "I reckoned yuh'd figger that way. That's why I stayed here. Got my gun lads on the streets on the lookout for yuh, and my extra iron wouldn't matter much."

He shifted. Captain Calder made a sound in his throat.

"Waitin' for yuh," Donohue went on. "Yuh're still valuable property. Yuh're goin' to hole up aboard the *Luna Maid.* That's why Calder is still here."

"Run—some more!" Cavell shook his head. "No! From now I shoot my way out!"

Donohue seemed almost not to have heard. "We've made arrangements," he said. "That variety show the *Maid's* company carries ain't due to start till midnight tonight. Right now the town's plumb crazy. Judge Bledsoe, he—"

"Where is Judge Bledsoe," Cavell demanded.

Into a second of silence Lisbeth's quiet voice came.

"Bourk hated to tell you, Tony. Fowler must've got hold of the judge. He's not to be located anywhere."

Donohue nodded. "That's why yuh've still got to keep runnin', Tony. If we got to Bledsoe yuh'd be all right, but looks like we can't. They'll get to me next, but meantime they got warrants out for you, signed by the sheriff and the marshal, Jules Dean. Dean's a bounty hunter—everybody knows that. He'd rather have you dead than alive.

"We can add up. The law administered as it is now calls you a criminal—and they don't intend yuh'll ever live to stand trial. There's too many of their

gunnies yuh could send over the long road, and they're keepin' faith with 'em by not lettin' yuh get in—they think! So it's shoot on sight. Now if we could get to Bledsoe—"

"How can we get to him?" Cavell said again, stubbornly.

"If I knew," Donohue said, "he wouldn't be where he is for long. They've got him—part of their plan. They won't kill him, not yet. But he's old, and—"

Donohue broke off. A girl had entered the room. She had come in so quietly that Cavell, up until then, had not known she was there. She stood quite still, just in back of Donohue's chair, and one slim hand went out to rest lightly on Donohue's shoulder.

Cavell's breath caught. This—this was the girl of the poster! The girl he had known in New Orleans, the girl who had scorned him for his belligerency. Denyse Brieux! The showboat star!

She looked less than twenty as she stood there, a contrast to the woman in the chair. Her hair, dusky as night sky over the Sierras, held a sheen of copper glow, and it fell to her white shoulders. Her lips were redder and more provocative than he remembered, and he had never been able to forget her eyes. They were long-lashed, holding shadows, dark and secret-filled.

Donohue reached up a big hand, touched hers, and cleared his throat.

"Somethin' yuh didn't know, Tony. Denyse Brieux—Denyse Donohue really—is my sister. That's why I wanted to know why you felt the way yuh did about her. She wanted to be an actress back East, and I reckon she's a good one. She's been travelin' with Cap'n Calder's showboat for most two years now, except for two engagements in the regular theaters at New Orleans and Biloxi. Yuh can see mebbe why—"

Cavell was shaking his head bewilderedly. It was all wrong. This girl shouldn't be in this! Calder's boat and company had been engaged to furnish entertainment for Fowler's howling mob.

She said, in a soft voice, as though she understood his thoughts:

"We take what engagements they send my boat on, Anthony. You see? Captain Calder had no way of knowing what the situation here would be."

HE NODDED, moistened his lips. All the hungry yearning he had ever felt for this girl was returning.

"Yes," he said. "I understand. Is that —all?"

Her eyes fell. "All," she said. "Except —I suppose I should tell you that I've thought often that I was wrong—once. A man has to fight, sometimes. My brother has showed me that. And I—I'm glad that you and he are on the same side."

Cavell turned, still bewildered, to Donohue. He knew he could not control his emotions too much longer.

"All right," he said. "I savvy. What next?"

"You hide. We find Bledsoe. That's all."

"Hide where?"

"Denny'll take you to the boat."

"The *Luna Maid?*"

"For a few hours." Donohue pulled out a big watch, got up and stretched. "I'll be busy with my boys locatin' Bledsoe. It's a cinch Fowler's got him hid somewheres. And as long as he keeps him hid it makes you fair game for Fowler's lawmen. Bledsoe may be getting along in years but he'd never willin'ly run out on a good fight."

Tony Cavell turned to the girl he had known first in New Orleans, the girl he knew now was the sister of his friend. Their eyes met. She was more lovely even than he had remembered.

"I'm coverin' the rear," Donohue said. "Me and some of the boys, till you get stowed." He smiled. "I still don't want

anything bad to happen to yuh till after tomorrow, Tony. If they do yuh in, they do for me along with a lot of decent folks at the same time."

Lisbeth Aiken smiled reassuringly. "You'll win out, Bourk."

Tony Cavell had always liked Lisbeth Aiken, but he liked her more in that moment than he ever had before. He knew the danger she was running by merely being in this company. Mobs, most of them drink-inspired mobs, roamed the streets. They, and their leaders, all knew of her close friendship with Donohue. Yet no suspicion of fear was in her.

She looked beautiful then, almost as beautiful as Donohue's sister.

Tony Cavell found his hand caught in Denyse's warm clasp and he saw Calder at the door. A gun was in the seaman's fist.

The captain turned and as he eased the door open a roar came into the room. It was part of the lurid night.

"Ready?" Calder said stonily. "Let's go!"

IV

FLARES from lighted kerosene in cans at the end of poles rioted up and down the slanting thoroughfares. In the east there was a crimson stain in the sky where some house had been fired. Guns exploded at intervals. The roar of questing, drunken mobs went up and down the ways.

All the streets slanted toward the riverfront and the boats tied up there —and all the streets were wild.

Amid all the chaos without, Ben Fowler sat serene in a small but luxurious suite of rooms on the second floor of the house at the edge of town that he had preempted after giving up his rooms over his own barroom, the Aces Up. The house had been built by the man from whom he had bought out the saloon and dancehall which had brought Fowler notoriety and given him his first foothold in the town. Fowler had been able to consolidate his position with the influx of trade and travel.

He was a huge-shouldered man with a wide and jutting lower jaw, always scraped blue, and a heavy mustache. On his big fingers were rings—diamonds —and his loosely tied cravat held a larger stone in a horseshoe setting.

He stabbed out a thick cigar, as thick as one of his own short fingers, and spoke to the man across from him.

"Honus," he said, "you want to stay on as sheriff here, don't yuh? And you, Jules, yuh want to keep that marshal's star. It pays dividends, I hear." He laughed. *"Bueno!* I'm not too sure of you, Wake," he told the sheriff. "Jules, he does what he's told and he don't ask questions. But yore games are part of mine, both of yuh. We got Bledsoe safe. We got the warrants for Cavell if we find him. But not a warrant from Bledsoe yet, on him!

"It's our law we're usin' tonight, till we can make Bledsoe see reason. That means we got to have Cavell, and not before any court that Bledsoe, if he does show up again, will ever control. We couldn't win. Everybody knows the fights were square and that Cavell shot in self defense. So the word is to get him—but get him dead while our warrants are good, not alive!"

"But," Sheriff Wake protested, "where is he? Donohue—"

"You scared of Donohue?" Fowler glared from one to the other of his henchmen.

JULES DEAN finally mustered the courage to answer.

"Yeah, I'm scared of him. Ain't you, boss?"

Fowler cursed.

He stabbed out his cheroot, got to his feet heavily.

"What yuh think I want him broke for? Now get out, both of yuh—and get him! And get Cavell before mornin'!"

He turned his back. Over his shoulder he said:

"Remember I didn't say get Cavell alive. You got the boys—and the booze. And yuh got yards of hemp!" He cursed again as the door closed quietly, growled to someone out of sight: "Get that Art Sparkes in. If we got to have a prosecuting attorney I want to make blame shore he knows who puts him there—and who gives the orders. . . ."

Denyse did not stay long on the showboat. There was only the memory of her, the suggestion of the fragrance that was her presence, after she departed. Tony Cavell stood, a lock of hair falling athwart his forehead and anger in his eyes, facing Captain Sam Calder of the *Luna Maid.*

THE big boat swung idly, sluggishly, with the ebb of river tide washing against the gaunt piers. Overhead the chain lantern in the cabin swung rhythmically, too. Sounds from the uproarious streets of the town came muted. Along the levee sounds drifted, voices breaking out in snatches of quarrel, sing-song commands. But over and above all was the voice of the lusty young town, with its knowledge of strength and threat of bloodshed and violence.

Cavell's face was damp. It looked thinned, more recklessly handsome under the odd light. It appeared almost pale but the pallor was offset by the glint in the narrowed eyes, something amber in their gray depths that would not be dimmed.

"The wolves are howling tonight, Cap'n," he said slowly, his ears cocked to the river sounds. "Hear?"

"Wolves always howl through a boom town, Cavell."

Cavell nodded negligently. "Donohue thinks I'm stayin' here, does he?"

"You are," Calder said, his jaw protruding.

"To listen to the wolves? Till after tomorrow's election? Like a convict?"

"If Fowler's gun slingers catch yuh up yuh won't be a convict; yuh'll be a corpse. You know they got orders to lynch!"

"Fowler's orders! But where's Bledsoe?" Cavell hit his fist on the table. It was a large fist at the end of a big arm. "They've got him a prisoner, that's what! I aim to find him—and before the voting starts tomorrow morning!"

"I'll be with you, Cavell," Calder said reasonably, " 'cept we don't know where to look. He might be a corpse pushin' at the poles in this very river under us, all we know."

"No, we know better than that. They've got to force him to sign papers first. Perhaps to drag me in and get Fowler's gunnies out! That show you brought here—for Fowler!" Cavell's lips quirked with disgust. "When does it go on?"

"It goes on at midnight, tonight. But I don't have to tell yuh, Cavell, that I didn't know they was routin' me on a game like this 'un is! The theater'll be packed and the show'll have to go on. It always has. Denyse—"

"She'll stand there and sing—for Fowler?"

"She'll do what she's been trained to do, what the others in the company'll do, because she's a trouper. Past that I wouldn't make a guess."

CAVELL'S gun had suddenly whipped out. Calder's voice broke off in a shocked ejaculation. The young candidate's eyes were elongated slits filled with fire.

"Don't move for your iron," Tony Cavell said. "Donohue didn't quite dare to take mine away—maybe he didn't have the heart for it, with the wolves howl-

ing for my blood. But I'm leaving, and now! And heaven help you or anybody else who gets in my way. I've been runnin' long enough. Clear?"

Calder backed to the end of the cabin. The mob roar broke through the portholes. Cavell's lips had flattened against his teeth and he was grinning a savage grin.

He backed carefully to the companionway.

A little above, on the forward deck, two sailors were cursing over a fouled rope and one was hanging something stiff against the capstan head. Mooring lines creaked soulfully as the craft rocked against the lines with the inflowing tide.

TONY CAVELL banged the door and dropped an outside bar into place. The last he remembered of the yellow-lit cabin was Calder's face.

He could have sworn that on it was a grin. . . .

The damp river air against his face, the stones of the quay under his boots, Cavell brought up to listen to the sounds growing more persistent. They would continue until after tomorrow's election. He saw vague knots of men moving among fog billows, pushed on. Lights beckoned ahead and he made for the dark thoroughfare intersecting Oregon Street.

If he had any immediate objective beside personal freedom, the thought of Fowler stayed uppermost in his mind. He tried to push thought of Denyse from his mind. She must be part of another existence.

He knew the streets thoroughly, so was able for the most part to avoid the shifting, rioting crowds. No one seemed to be indoors this night. Torchlight flares painted grotesque patterns on walls far from where they burned. In front of one of the smaller waterfront groggeries near the end of Oregon Street, he stopped in front of a glaring sign to read:

FREE! FREE WHISKY! FREE!
THE SPARKES CAMPAIGN
COMMITTEE IS YOUR HOST
TONIGHT!
Take All you Need and then Visit the
FREE
SHOWBOAT SHOW!
REPUBLIC THEATER
TONIGHT!

Cavell went doggedly on. He wanted Bledsoe or, failing Bledsoe, Donohue. He had to enlist Donohue's active aid in locating Bledsoe. That was the primary problem.

A curse sounded at his shoulder just as he was passing a bar of light thrown by the next open saloon doorway. He moved instinctively, and his hand just as instinctively fell on the revolver he had holstered. He whirled, eyes flaming with the anger of an animal hunted too long, teeth shining in a snarl. A bearded face split in the center to shout: "C'mon here! It's Cavell, the killer! Here!"

"Bounty!" another voice took it up.

Two figures came erupting out of a dank alley. Guns flashed in the yellow lighting from the saloon doorway. A shout came from inside there. Cavell backed to the hitch-rail at the edge of the sidewalk. The shouts multiplied.

There were suddenly two men facing him, and one six-gun began spewing flame from the edge of the doorway. The crowd inside the saloon backed as its initial rush became halted by the first bursts of fire.

Cavell, from the height of his hip, snapped a shot at the man with the bearded face, aware that the other man was moving in a circle to get between him and the horses. He saw his own burst of fire blend with the other's, then the man crumpled like a sawdust doll.

He swiveled, not waiting for the fall,

met the second killer's shot as he turned. Two streams of fire blended across semi-dark, then the man made a grab for the hitch-rail, missed, and went to his shoulders in the dust.

Whirling, Cavell snapped a shot at the mouth of the saloon doorway, laughed a harsh laugh when the lookers-on there scuttled from target sight, whirled to jerk loose a horse's tie rope. He vaulted the hitch-rail and his left boot found the stirrup on the off side. In a second more he was in somebody's saddle and turning the frightened horse's head out into the main street.

As he dug in his heels, aware that he had chosen a buckskin pony rangier than most, a pair of shots followed him and lead went singing past his hat brim. He jammed gun into holster and eased his mount toward the darkness at the street's farther end.

Hysteria followed him. Shooting and shouting blended. He pushed his animal in between a pair of false-fronted shacks not far from Donohue's place, and the darkness at this end of town came to his aid as he thundered on.

"Horse thief now, too," he murmured grimly. But he didn't stop.

Behind, pursuit was disorderly and wild. He eased his pace, deliberately turning backward in the direction from which he had come, stepping the buckskin carefully now in the dark alleys. Again the smell of the waterfront was in his nostrils.

Along here, outside the small shacks where vendors of waterfront merchandise lived, it was totally dark. There were one or two low houses blanketed in darkness and one that showed a dim red light alongside a fish vendor's. A warehouse loomed ahead.

V

CAVELL pulled in. That warehouse! He had not made that place his destination, and he had no intention of willingly offering himself for a lynch party. He had good reason to have no liking for the place, for in front of the fog-blanketed warehouse hung a sign reading:

FOWLER'S
Ship Chandlery—Supplies

As he scanned the sign a light winked out from somewhere in the rear of the warehouse. He dismounted slowly and gave the buckskin a light pat on the flank. The animal moved off, and Tony sought the shadows on the far side of the building, to move along under cover toward the rear of the warehouse.

A light blinked ahead of him again but he could not be certain of its location. All he knew was that inside the building there was life. The light had come from the rear, so he circled in that direction.

The sounds of pursuit had abated momentarily. He had come far from the center of town. His hand brushed his gun hip, and he paused to slide fresh cartridges into emptied chambers. Then he was again sliding in the dark at the rear of Ben Fowler's warehouse.

When Anthony Cavell, candidate for prosecuting attorney in the new state, stepped into the short ditch that ran alongside the warehouse he no longer wore a coat. His .45 hung at his side and he had tied down the holster. He moved slowly toward the light he had glimpsed. Behind him he could still hear faintly in the distance the blood-hungry cries of the manhunters under Marshal Dean who were searching for him.

He circled the long building tentatively, all the while keeping in his mind the location of that single light he had espied. Every window seemed to be barred securely. Every door, too, which was odd, for an honest merchandising warehouse.

He dropped back a bit, to gauge what

scaling to the roof might get him and whether it would pay to try. He was sure that inside there somewhere, probably near the glimmer of light he had seen, he would find a clue to Judge Bledsoe's whereabouts, if not the judge himself.

As he made another careful tour of the warehouse exterior, he could hear voices inside, but could not make out what was being said. Only a mumble of voices.

Suddenly, peering around a corner of his listening post, without warning he came face to face with a bewhiskered mountain of a man. He started to draw back, but the man had seen him. Cursing, the fellow dived through the blue moonlight which was tinted by flames from the town's center, with a choked cry. Cavell's gun came chopping downward as the man who was hurtling into him was bringing up a shortened .44.

Before Tony Cavell could leap to one side, the muzzle of the man's gun was in his ribs and writhing arms were about him. In the next instant, he knew, there would be a cry from that hairy throat. Surprise and anger had so far throttled it.

But the cry never came. Cavell kneed upward as his antagonist's gun came down and the man rolled sideward. Cavell grasped at the man's hand which held the gun, twisted it back, momentarily expecting the explosion which would give the warning. His hand smashed flat against the bearded chin and something cracked. The wrist caught in his grip became lax. Eyes savage, Cavell used the heel of his free hand to smash hard against the hairy throat a second time.

The man's head rolled back loosely as he went limp. Swiftly Cavell bent over his fallen foe. He could feel a heartbeat, but it was faint and irregular. The fellow was out. His gun lay in the mud.

Light wavered from behind the sheeted metal window for which the man had been heading. Cavell waited. The window was moved open cautiously, quietly, almost down to ground level. A head peered out and a man's voice made a low query. Cavell's gun slapped down so that its barrel hit slantwise. The head sagged.

Gently, noiselessly, Tony Cavell eased a gaunt figure out through the window into the mud. Then he swung himself through the opening, which was no more than chest high, into the warehouse. He landed lightly, then stood rigidly still to listen.

It was from ahead, where a glimmer of light showed through chinks in a door, that the low murmur of voices was coming. As he listened, unmoving, one voice rose above others. He stood listening, but he knew Fowler's voice, and soon was convinced that Fowler was not here. The men here were Fowler's henchmen, of course, and they had plans.

The two outside? One had been coming here, perhaps with a message they were awaiting. The second man undoubtedly had been a gunman guard detailed to keep watch. And the men in that room beyond believed him still at his post.

Cavell recognized a voice as he crept closer—that of Cutty Ramsdell, Fowler's gunhand, who would be sheriff or marshal after tomorrow, if Fowler's faction won! In a moment more, Cavell was certain that Fowler's plans were being conveyed to his men through Ramsdell.

Creeping closer to the light, Tony Cavell heard enough to assure himself that he was right.

"—then everybody out," he heard. "That's the first thing, see—get this Cavell hombre, and don't stop to get him alive! Make shore yuh got witnesses to swear yuh ordered him to surrender to the Law. We're still Law! Then, what-

ever he does—shoot! We got Bledsoe, but Bledsoe would have to clear him if'n he—"

"Where is Bledsoe?" a voice demanded, and Tony Cavell felt all of his muscles tighten.

A harsh laugh, a laugh that chilled him, was the first part of the reply. Then Cavell heard:

"Bledsoe's likely to show up late tomorrow—mebbe! Though he might not be exactly the same man he was when he left. *Sabe?* Even now he can save hisself a lot of pain by agreein' to what we want of him. That's a blanket warrant for Cavell, and a writ callin' for State law to appoint our boys where we want 'em. Also to call off the State warrants for four of our bunch. But he won't play."

"Shore, Bledsoe won't give in!" another man growled. "He's a hangin' judge. He's a fightin' man."

"Nobody, 'specially at his age, c'n stand certain pains too long," came Ramsdell's cold flat voice, with a low chuckle. "Bledsoe's up where he won't be found—and that's at Fowler's line cabin, the acreage the boss took over when he decided old Ringbolt was too old to keep on workin' his claim.

"When they discovered gold in the creek up there, Ringbolt died. Lead, some say. In the wrong places. Remember? The boss started a barroom up there for the creek miners that was still pannin', only it didn't work. But he held on to the cabin and the acreage. Nice place, but—"

Cavell didn't hear the rest. He was taking care to step soundlessly over the body of the man he had dragged through the window, and he certainly would not disturb the other one. Hastily leaving the warehouse he headed for the mist-choked street.

The line cabin up at Ringbolt's creek! There had been a strike made up there but it had soon fizzled out. A few flakes of dust could still be panned from the creek, but no one had ever been able to locate the source of it up above. It was merely another abandoned claim now. Ringbolt had staked it, built a large cabin with his first rich returns from a rock pocket above.

The cabin, twelve miles from town, was backed against a culvert on higher ground above the trail, and the prospector had had high plans for his holdings. Then one night he had been found dead on the street in town, with two slugs of lead through his chest.

Two days afterward Fowler had filed claim to the property, showing Ringbolt's papers to prove his warranty. The courts had passed it—it was outside Judge Bledsoe's jurisdiction—and the land had become Fowler's. But no mining was going on there now. . . .

RIDING a horse that he had chosen at random from the hitch-rail outside the warehouse, Tony Cavell pulled in not far from the cabin just below where outjutting shale cliffs marked the edge of the Ringbolt claim. He had made a swift ride.

He eased to the ground and let the animal nose into brush flanking the spindly trail. Here the air was cool, and the clamor and riot gripping the town could almost be forgotten. The scent of the pines sweetened the air; there was the soothing ripple of the "gold stream," a wholesomeness that the river town had never known.

Cavell spied lights ahead and moved toward them. He had not progressed ten paces, however, over the rock-strewn path upward toward the lights that shone through a curtain of trees about the long house when a challenge came.

"Who's that?"

He hesitated, then went on resolutely. He saw a gun glimmer under starlight, saw the hunched form behind it. Still

he kept on.

"Who would it be?" he said quickly, in imperative accents. "The boss inside?"

"Chief? Left half an hour back. He's down in town. Mebbe nobody told yuh they's a party there tonight!"

"There's a party here too, unless the chief crossed his dates for me," Cavell said shortly. He lifted his head, listening. The sound of a tinkly piano came to him, voices raised in a snatch of drunken song. Fowler's henchmen were celebrating tomorrow's election in advance. Why not, he thought ironically, when their opponent was a fugitive and the only judge was a captive?

Dark hid his features until he was almost upon his challenger.

"I got work," he snapped. "I'm going on in."

He started past. A hard face peered at him, but his hat was well down. Cavell was well aware that the man had not lowered his gun, but the lawyer counted on the fact that it would be believed no sane man would be expected to walk into the enemy den alone on a night like this.

He brushed past the guard, who growled something as he stepped back. Cavell followed the rock pathway to the low-slung porch. Light from within shone down across the steps. Crossing the porch, he pushed his way inside.

A number of men were there—fifteen or twenty of them—but Fowler was not present. The men were gathered about a tin-panny piano, making song in bleary voices. Some waved glasses as they moved, some bottles of beer or whisky.

A man lurched into Cavell, an individual with a beard.

"Better late 'n never!" he said. "Fill 'er up, waddy! We got time to down a lot of this stuff before we hit town again. The rest of 'em, they're down there already, waitin' for the show to commence. We'll come in for the end of it. When Fowler's gal is due to come on." He reeled off.

"Fowler's gal!" That was it, then! They had been told that the singer in the showboat company was Fowler's girl! The rage that went through Cavell stuck in his throat. But he stepped toward the bar with blank eyes.

The evil-visaged man behind the bar winked, placed a fresh brown bottle on the bar-top and had started to speak when Cavell heard a voice he knew he must hear. It was the voice of Cutty Ramsdell, Fowler's chief gunslinger.

"Give 'im time to git his drink down," Ramsdell rasped. "And then, hombres —nail him to the floor!"

Cavell had one instant's vision of Ramsdell's bloated face, the fierce red-rimmed eyes. Then something cracked against the back of his skull and he swayed face foremost across the bar. Dimly, through fog, he could hear Ramsdell's thick voice saying:

"No, no! Not now! We have our fun with him when the night's over! Right now—"

And Cavell heard no more.

VI

ANTHONY CAVELL awakened to the sound of a long drawn-out groan. At first he thought it was a sound that had passed his own lips, for his head was splitting, and he knew, even as awareness came, that his hands had been tied tightly to his sides. He essayed to move but could not, then heard the groan once again.

Opening his eyes, he found that he was lying in almost total darkness on a flooring of rough boards. Ahead, a sliver of light showed where a door must be, and from behind the light slice came the raucous sounds he had heard when he was last conscious. But the groan came again, less a groan than a protest

against pain. He strained awake, fully aware now. Understanding came. He spoke into darkness.

"Judge Bledsoe!"

The groan broke off into a mumbled query.

"Who are you?"

"It's Cavell! They've got us both. Hurt bad?"

"If I ever get out of here I'll live to see the rest of that bourbon in my cellar don't go to my heirs! No, not much hurt at all." The judge spoke between hard breaths. "Reckon that wasn't their idea. I got to be kept conscious because they've got to have me sign some papers. For your arrest on a murder charge, one of 'em. Another is a paper appointin' Dean presidin' justice pro tempore. Till I get back. That'll mean—"

"It'll mean all of Fowler's jailed killers who are waiting for trial will get off scot free within twelve hours," Cavell grunted.

He was straining at his bonds. But they were tight.

He understood the whole program of the owner of the Aces Up Saloon now. With Bledsoe's enforced signatures, Fowler could break all of his criminal following out of jail, without sentencing. Not only that, but he would be able to name the appointees to any law enforcement job in the county. He could rid himself of Cavell and the threat of new law coming in, even if Cavell did manage to survive.

"How did you get here?" Cavell asked, licking already dry lips and trying to forget the pain in his head.

"Neat as a trivet," the judge confessed. "They called me in to take a deposition. S'posed to be a dyin' man—one of Fowler's gang. Man sent word he'd give us more evidence than what we got already. I went. Blanket in a cabin, over my head. Buckboard then. Wound up here." Bledsoe sighed. "The worst is to come. It's torture for us, Cavell, for both of us, unless we give in."

Cavell swore. "I was a fool. I knew you had to be here, somewhere—heard something. There was no chance of getting in touch with Donohue. They're scouring the streets for me, below. So I took a chance and came on alone, figuring they had a big crowd here and might not recognize me till I found what I wanted. I found you all right," he added bitterly, "but it seems they found me, too."

"Donohue might do something."

"Donohue doesn't know where I am! He put me, as he thought, safe aboard the showboat. I left it. His sister—"

"Sister?"

"Yes. The showboat girl is his sister."

"The one they call Denyse Brieux?"

"Yes. But she couldn't have known I got away. I started for here," Cavell finished wryly, "and here I am!"

It was like a nightmare, lying there helpless in the dark, talking across space to a man old enough to be his father. A full well of bitterness came to choke in Cavell's throat, bitterness at his helplessness. Bitterness for what must be happening outside.

His nomination for election was forgotten. That was another fight. He hadn't wanted to lose, but it still took a secondary place beside the thought of the arrogant injustice being worked. This land, tomorrow or the day after, would be a state. And it would receive its gift of statehood with Fowler as its boss. A fine baptism!

They were agonizing thoughts. The whole run of Cavell's churning emotions became agonizing. He strained again at the bonds that held him, only to assure himself that they had been well tied.

BEHIND the crack of light penetrating past the edges of the door, the unbridled revel went on. Cavell's senses were restored entirely now and there

was only the dull ache in the back of his head—which merely spurred his thinking.

Denyse? There was nothing she could do but carry out her contract. She would have no part in this. Even the fact that she was Donohue's young sister didn't seem to affect anything. But it was hard to think of any Donohue quitting a fight.

The judge's breathing was becoming more labored. Cavell's leaded eyelids opened as the door pushed inward and the streak of light widened across the drab back room. With the light and the figure in the doorway came the shadow of a man. The man stood there, wavering. He spoke across the dark to the judge.

"You got three minutes, Judge. I'll take loose one of them hands of yore'n so's it can be limber enough for yuh to sign. If you're not ready to sign when I come back— Savvy?"

"Maybe I don't," said the judge wearily.

The man in the doorway chuckled. "This hombre sharin' yore solitude, he's due to be strung up by his thumbs before we make him a dummy for target practice. Mebbe yuh'll see part of it. I know yuh won't be alive to see the end, though, not unless yuh make chicken-tracks across these papers." The man bent over. There was a slash. *"Bueno!* Yuh been tied up a long time. The papers is ready when yore hand is ready."

The door closed, the lock rattled. Across the space of dark Cavell rasped:

"When they come back tell 'em yuh'll sign."

"What do you mean? I wouldn't sign such papers!"

"Tell 'em anyhow."

Cavell was inching himself across the floor. Presently the judge felt Cavell's bound wrists at his side.

"Get to work on those knots!" Cavell grated. "Fast! They don't think either of us is in shape for a fight. Maybe we're not. But they won't be able to say we didn't try! Quick!"

Judge Bledsoe was wheezing so hard he did not waste any breath on words as he obeyed. Cavell leaned back with the strain on his wrists. The knots had bitten tight. Presently as he could feel one coming loose he wondered why the enemy had permitted this opportunity. Then, as he bit his lip against pain, he understood.

They would welcome the chance to shoot him down and believed, after the judge had signed, that they would have a clear way. They would delight in his attempt to try to fight his way out. After they had the needed signatures from the judge they could attend to him.

The last knot slipped loose and Cavell rolled over.

"And where will that get us?" Judge Bledsoe rasped. "We've got no gun, no weapon of any kind!"

"We'll have to get one," Cavell said, and got busy working circulation back into his wrists and hands.

"No matter how it comes out, Cavell," the judge said, "I appreciate your trying to come for me."

"I suppose I figured I might get past with it because of the excitement," Cavell said. "They certainly wouldn't expect me. Maybe too," he added grudgingly, "I was honin' for a fight. And I didn't even get that." His head throbbed.

"You will, I should guess," Bledsoe wheezed. "They're coming. What next?"

Cavell turned over on his side and said savagely:

"Tell 'em you'll sign! Tell 'em your hand's still stiff and gain what time you can while easin' their suspicions—if they have any. I'll do the rest. I'll try, anyway! Keep 'em talking!"

The door creaked open, and all the raucous sounds came in. Then the door creaked almost shut again and there was semi-darkness. The same voice

which had spoken before, a voice coming from a blurred shadow in the room's center, croaked:

" 'Bout ready for signin', Judge? Or is it the board with the thumb-racks on it?"

Cavell felt a shiver go through him. They hung a man up that way, thumbs high while he lay against a board propped against the wall. His thumbs, in small screws, held his weight—and the weight of the judge was considerable.

"Because," the voice went on, "if yuh can't use yore hands any other way that's useful, we might just as well tie 'em up, help to stretch some of yuh. What's the word?"

Bledsoe's voice came weakly. "Bring it in a minute. Hand's a little numb yet. But I'll sign."

CAVELL slid into a crouch. As the man turned into the wedge of light, the lawyer sprang. His right hand darted to the holster fairly outlined against the man's thigh, jerked loose the .45 there. Bledsoe was on his feet, weaving.

The heel of Cavell's hand came up and hit into the Adam's apple of the guard. There was a choked-off curse. The man slumped against him, feet threshing as Cavell's left forearm bent about his neck and drew him back. Cavell brought up the butt of the gun then, and the flat of it raked down across a broken nose and jaw that had lost its leer. A burst of laughter penetrated from outside.

Cavell struck with the gun again. Then he eased his victim to the scarred floor, breathing hard with his exertions.

"Now," he said to the judge, "we get out."

"How?"

Cavell turned to the door. Outside it, the bursts of laughter continued. No one had noticed the fracas.

"I saw signs of a remuda on my way in, but there'll be guards," he said. "Slip out that window. The ground's no more than a couple of feet below here, at the rear. When you get out, turn right to the corner of this house."

Bledsoe went about obeying without comment. The window, a sheet of some kind of metal hinged at either side with strips of boards, was open. It swung inward from the top. Breathing hard, Bledsoe swung through. Cavell heard his grunt as he landed. Cavell backed.

"Where'n thunder has Crookednose got to in there?" a voice from outside said. "What's he doin'? I want to see some of the fun when it opens up, before we hit for the theater in town." His feet scuffed toward the door.

Cavell's chin was at the window ledge and his feet were dangling outside when the first of the gang came through the door. A boot stumbled across the prone body on the floor. A thick curse followed. On the heels of it came a wild yell. Cavell's pistol came up and he fired twice into a huddle of bodies. They scattered. He dropped. Then, at Bledsoe's yell, he was running.

While he stumbled on he was reaching for his gun-belt for cartridges. Fortunately they had left him his belt when they had taken his pistol from him, so he still had .45 caliber cartridges and that was what the weapon he had taken called for.

He almost ran into Bledsoe, but was warned by the wheeze in the judge's throat. Beyond the fugitives, horses stirred. A few of them still wore saddles. Cavell touched Bledsoe's shoulder.

"Let's just keep on going!" he said, and grabbed a bridle, jerking reins loose from the crude hitch-rack to which the mounts were tied.

Bledsoe was in the saddle, still puffing. Cavell cried to the awakened night and any who might hear, "Did they

come this way? Watch for 'em!" and thundered past the astonished outpost with Bledsoe trailing.

Two shots, then a third, barked belatedly. The sharp hoofs of the stolen ponies hit gravel and rock, and after that hard-packed trail. The going was downhill, toward where the lights of the town, at the edge of the river, like wavering and zigzagging fireflies made fantastic arabesques in the dark and fog.

All perdition had broken loose below and Fowler's men were in the full flush of their celebration. As the two escaping men thundered downslope, with cries trailing their rear, Cavell's eyes sought the pattern of the riverfront. Lights bobbed about there, but a sullen haze that was dull crimson seemed to be wavering across it.

"Where to?" the judge panted.

"The show-house!" Cavell snapped. "That's where Fowler's stagin' his big party! He's tellin' the world tonight that all opposition's dead and that from tomorrow he owns the Bend!"

Anthony Cavell's laugh was wild, not at all the laugh of a dignified attorney.

VII

BEN FOWLER, a huge toad of a man with an excess of hair on all visible parts of his body, looked down at the girl with copper-dusky hair who stood before him. The frilled and beruffled shirt he wore looked incongruous on his huge frame, as incongruous as the big diamond-horseshoe stickpin in his flowing and badly-arranged cravat. Behind Fowler two of his hired gunmen stood in shadow cast by wavering kerosene lamps, smirks overspreading their faces as they watched.

Standing in the wings of the theater, Denyse Donohue tossed back her head in a challenge.

"You think you can force me to sing for you?"

Fowler was crude, but not stupid. Two acts had gone on and had been applauded. There had been a minstrel foursome and a man with a banjo who had sung "Stackalee," but Denyse had not sung a note.

"No," he said. "Not force. But you'll sing. The judge is hangin' up by his thumbs by now, and Cavell—"

"Where?" Her voice choked.

"You worryin' about Cavell, or the judge?"

"Where?" she repeated, and Fowler laughed.

"Don't matter. Yuh prob'ly won't see either of 'em again. Not unless yuh sing. This here, tonight, it's my party. Paid for. Out there"—he waved a hand toward the asbestos curtain—"are my guests—invited. They're here to vote my way, and I don't aim to have 'em disappointed. Yuh're singin' for 'em, or I'll take pleasure in deliverin' parts of yore friend Cavell to yuh by mornin', come election. Do we savvy each other?"

"And"—she found it difficult to speak—"Mr. Donohue?"

Fowler made a hoarse sound in his throat. "Yore brother, yuh mean? Oh, we know! We didn't, but we do!"

She faltered. Her eyes held fire. But she managed:

"How could you—know?"

A roar came from out in front. Fowler's free liquor had started to work. He grinned and as he swayed toward her she shrank from him.

"The boat," he said. "My boys took it over tonight. We found yore cabin. Letters addressed to you from here, to yore New Orleans address. Denyse Brieux—stage name for Denyse Donohue. Old Louisiana family, eh? But the brother didn't change his."

Her eyes flashed. "Neither my brother nor I ever had reason to change our names!" she said, then realized what she had admitted. But the same hard chuckle acknowledged the admission.

The small orchestra had about ended its tune and there was stamping of feet and loud and insistent shouting for further amusement.

"Get out of here," Fowler said, "pronto. We're takin' care of yore brother. We even might let him live after tomorrow, if he gets out of town. He'll have to, anyhow, after the election. It's up to you. Sing for the boys and, if yuh like it that way, for yore brother. But disappoint us, and mebbe yuh know what will happen to him."

"Do you think any brother of mine would have me sing for his safety?" she began, when Fowler grabbed her arm.

The curtain rang up. Denyse Donohue had a last vision of Fowler, the cigar clamped back in his wide mouth, his eyebrows bushy. He stood between his two henchmen. She paled and walked away toward the stage.

Gasflares lit the proscenium. There were four big torches in the hall's rear. For the rest, the place was dark, except for the stage. The rhythmic stamping died, and yells and whistles succeeded, to be drowned in the scraping of the makeshift orchestra, trying to play an interlude after the last turn. Past the footlights the girl could catch a glimpse of a full whisky bottle being passed from one to another. The hands were hairy and the faces part of a phantasmagoria. The orchestra was playing. Her voice came, into silence.

She never knew how she got through the song, for her brain was racing. But she found herself singing to the end:

O Susannah, don't you cry for me,
I'm bound for Califor-ni-ay with a banjo on my knee.

The husky low lilt of her voice captured her audience, scoundrels though most of them were that night. They were not all bad; she was aware of that. But Fowler had gauged well. His audience counted the good and the bad. Many were rough placer miners from the lower slopes, but each and every one of them had a vote. A lot of them were Fowler's own men, and a lot more were men whom his men would be able to influence.

A BURST of applause roared to the rafters. Denyse stepped back.

In the wings Fowler was glowing. In a minute more he would come out to make a speech, she knew. She bowed to the applause, bit her lips, and when silence came, sang again—the song that the Eastern poet, Foster, had sent sighing across the land before he died: "I Dream of Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair."

The last notes died. There came a hush. The squeaky orchestra failed to strike up a tune and into the vacuum of sound the girl flung her arms wide. Into the hush she cried:

"I've sung for you—for *you!*—but not for Ben Fowler and his gang! What you've heard have been songs I learned when I was a little girl, with my brother, and my brother's name is—Bourk Donohue!"

The Fowler contingent tried to stop her, but it was out. Everyone in the hall knew its implication. There came a roar that started from nowhere, spread. Men were on their feet. A gunshot blazed out from the rear of the hall. The curtain was rung down as curses were roared.

Denyse turned back to a stage she had thought empty, and facing her was Ben Fowler. Beside Fowler was one of his henchmen, the man she had heard called Cutty—Cutty Ramsdell. Fowler's face was as black as thunder, his powerful jaw was an animal's—a bull's. His fancy red-tinted vest had pulled up until it made him look like an angry pouter pigeon.

Guns were showing. The mob out in

front of the curtain was in an uproar but still leashed until orders came. Meanwhile men were stampeding into riot.

Denyse fell back, drained momentarily of her courage. But not for long. She fell back into arms that caught her and held her, and there was the sound of a shot over her head as she was forced backward into the flimsy wings.

Somewhere a voice was crying: "Fire!"

And her brother's voice, usually flat and hard, was saying:

"Down! Do you think I was sleeping?"

But Fowler's gunswifts were coming on. A queer place this, backstage, for the end of a battle. Flames were licking upward, Cutty Ramsdell was firing fast. Past Ramsdell, another of Fowler's guncutters was doing the same.

Then a strange, yet warmly familiar voice broke into the bedlam:

"This way, Judge, you old hellion!"

And in some way Tony Cavell was there on the scene, both his hands filled with guns, and behind him lumbered the oversize form of the man Fowler had held captive.

Gunfire blazed across the stage. Cap'n Calder's voice arose shrill and, behind him, leaping obstacles, his riverboat men came, staves and boards and marlinespikes in hand, some with guns.

Smoke swirled wraithlike across the scene. The mob roar intensified, but no one parted that fallen curtain. Death lay behind it. The men out there knew that.

Donohue's voice was cool, steadying. He kept telling his men to take cover.

"It'll be settled now, easy," he was saying, in that calm, never-hurried voice of his. "One of their own men gunned out Sparkes—by mistake! He got too close. Steady!"

Then Cavell and Fowler were facing one another, and flanking Fowler was Seth Braydon. Ramsdell had gone down. Donohue's gun came up and his weapon and Braydon's exploded together. Braydon sank backward, knees buckling, blood gurgling from his chest. Fowler still came steadily on, and then he and Cavell were face to face. Donohue cursed and flung away his revolver as the hammer clicked on an empty cylinder.

Bledsoe emitted a warwhoop as he fired at the man on Fowler's left, even as Fowler steadied his aim at Cavell.

CAVELL'S gun and Fowler's blended in a single wash of crimson flame. Fowler fell backward. A cry came from Donohue and he dashed an empty gun into the face of Fowler's companion—Jules Dean, erstwhile marshal, just bringing up a .45 at Cavell.

Bledsoe howled. He fired again. Dean fell across the body of his chief.

The curtain wavered. Denyse felt weak. But the sting of gunsmoke was still in her nostrils and the silence began to press in. She felt her brother's arm over her shoulders, steadying her. His approving voice in her ears.

"Swell job, child. Now if yuh can make it across the stage I'll deliver you to Tony Cavell. Seems he might be needing some attention, but he'll live. He'll live all right, to build a clean town for us. And I'm hopin', Denny, yuh'll stay here to see it."

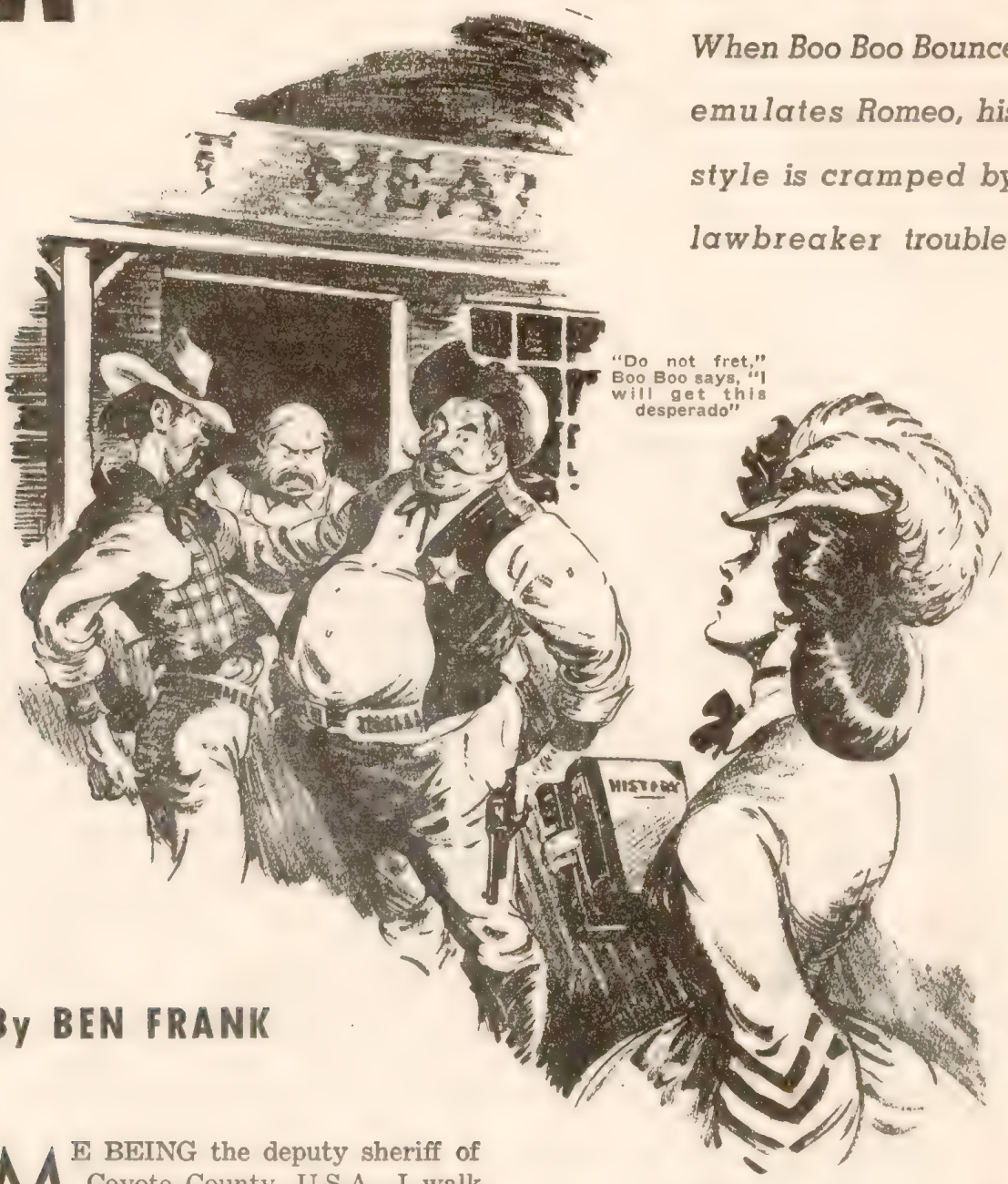
She looked from his bronzed face, across to meet Cavell's eager eyes. She groped forward to meet him.

"I'm staying, Bourk," she said over shoulder. "After all, I sang for my part in the new town, didn't I?" Her voice was a little unsteady.

But not Cavell's arms, holding her tight. They were real. And to Tony Cavell, too, who had fought for what he knew was right, there was a new world in his arms. A world he was helping, with her, to make.

A HERO, and NO MISTAKE

When Boo Boo Bounce emulates Romeo, his style is cramped by lawbreaker trouble!



By BEN FRANK

ME BEING the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., I walk into the jail office without knocking, to tell Boo Boo Bounce, who is the sheriff, that we have got no afternoon mail. And what do I see but Boo Boo himself standing on his two feet.

Now, Boo Boo Bounce is no hand to stand on his feet when there is a chair handy, him being no little heavy, and then some. And then I see that he is not only on his feet, but is eying himself in a mirror, and that he is wearing his six-gun. This latter is indeed astounding, for he is no little gun-shy.

"Boo Boo," I say hoarsely, "what has

gone and happened?"

He turns to look at me, and his fat face becomes somewhat pink, while his three chins quiver slightly.

"Hopewell," he sighs, "nothing as yet has happened."

And he wets a finger in his mouth and plasters down a stray lock of hair very neat to the top of his head where there is a bald spot beginning to peep through. He sighs again.

"Hopewell, nothin' never happens here in Polecat, which is a fact that gives me a little displeasure."

Truly I realize that Boo Boo has gone completely loco, for the less that happens, the better he has always liked it previous to now. I wonder if it is the heat which has affected him thusly, and I drop down on a chair and stare at him.

"Deputy," he continues, "you bein' a married man have unlikely noticed that the new schoolteacher, Miss Lorenzen, is a very tasty dish, and no mistake. In fact, she is prettier than a crusty apple pie with a side dish of whipped cream."

HE DROPS a hand to the butt of his .45 and stands very erect, considering the pull of gravity on his oversized middle.

"Hopewell, how do I look?"

I am a smart man and know better than to tell him the truth. Also, I know he is wearing the gun and primping only because he has took a fancy to Miss Lorenzen.

"Boo Boo, yuh look very handsome indeed," I say.

"True," he agrees, "but none-the-less, Miss Lorenzen does not know that I exist. That is because I am the Sheriff of Coyote County where nothing never happens to make me a hero. Hopewell, I wisht utmostly that a gang of desperados would ride into town and shoot up the place so's I could go out and rescue Miss Lorenzen. I wisht—"

"Boo Boo," I gasp, "leave us make no wish like this never."

THE door bangs open, and I jump some three feet straight up into the air and land on my feet, for I expect nothing less than a flock of owlhooters to come in with blazing guns. But it is only Ton-thumb Tucker, who runs the Polecat butcher shop, and is called "Ton-thumb" because it is estimated that his thumb has added a good ton of weight to the numerous cuts of meat which he has sold around and about to the citizens of Coyote County.

"Sheriff," he says, very full of wrath indeed, "somethin' has got to be done about old Wrap-around Waggle!"

Boo Boo frowns, and I see that he is somewhat upset by this sudden interruption of thinking of Miss Lorenzen.

"What has Wrap-around Waggle gone and done?" he asks.

"The old maverick has just stole a good twenty feet of wrappin' string from me," Ton-thumb says. "Now, understand a jasper can have any kind of a hobby he wants, even string-savin'. But when he starts stealin' to add to his collection, that is carryin' a hobby too blasted far."

"Why didn't yuh bawl him out yoreself?" Boo Boo asks.

"It is thisaway," Ton-thumb explains. "Bein' very short-sighted and unable to see the numbers on my meat scale, old Wrap-around is one of my best customers. I would not want to make a best customer sore by accusin' him of stealin' my string. Besides, that is what we have got a sheriff for. And I expect yuh to leave my name out of it when yuh put a scare into the old buzzard."

Boo Boo sighs and sets down in his easy chair.

"I will take care of the situation diplomatic," he says.

The butcher goes out, and Boo Boo looks at me and twiddles his thumbs very energetic.

"Deputy," he says, "a man cannot make a hero out of himself by givin' a

old loco string-saver a goin' over."

I say nothing, but I know what he is thinking.

"Deputy," he goes on, "ride out to Wrap-around Waggle's place and get Ton-thumb's string back. Also, make it no little plain to Wrap-around that we will not tolerate no more string stealin' in Coyote County. In the meantime, I will set here and try to devise a way to become a hero."

I put on my hat and am half-way through the door, when he adds:

"Hopewell, also in the meantime, yuh might as well do some thinkin' along the same line as I am. In case yuh should come up with a bright idea, I will give yuh a ten-dollar bonus in cash so's yore wife will not know of it."

Now, ten dollars cannot be ignored, especially if your wife does not know about same so she cannot put the clinch on it. Thinking very hard indeed, I go to the stable back of the jail and saddle my hoss.

I am still thinking when I lead my hoss out into the open. Therefore, I am somewhat startled when a voice says:

"H'lo, Hopewell."

The speaker, I observe, is "Shoe-on" Sorby, a old bachelor who lives some little distance outside Polecat, and on his seamy face is a very worried expression.

"Hopewell," he says, "I have been walkin' in my sleep again lately."

"Shoe-on," I say—we call him thusly, for on account of his sleep-walking, he keeps his shoes on his feet both night and day because he never knows when he is likely to go walking around and about in his sleep and step on a very sharp rock or a cactus leaf—"Shoe-on," I say, "I am sorry to hear this."

"I have got to find out to where at I have been walking these last few nights, and no mistake."

"Why?"

"That," he says, "is not exactly any of yore business, but nonetheless, I must find out. How could I do that?"

"Hire somebody to set around at night and foller yuh."

He shakes his head very positive.

"I do not want nobody pokin' around in my business."

"Well," I say, "I have got other things to think about. Besides, I have got to go give Wrap-around Waggle a good goin' over. He has been stealin' string for his collection."

Shoe-on blinks rapid. "String?" he murmurs. "Umm."

I MOUNT my hoss and ride on along the street.

"Greetings, Hopewell," another voice says, and who do I see but "High-cut" Harry, who is a gambler and haunts various places such as saloons and dancehalls.

"Good afternoon," I say very distant, for I remember how a few days previous, High-cut Harry has won two quarters and a half-buck from me by cutting aces four times out of five.

"Hopewell," he says very sad indeed, "today is my unlucky day. Every time I have cut for high card, I have come up with a deuce or a trey."

"Is that a fact?" I say, somewhat interested.

"The absolute truth!"

He pulls a deck of cards from a pocket, shuffles and cuts. What do I see but a deuce of clubs staring me in the face.

"See," he says. "All day long it has been thusly."

This is when I see a chance to get my dollar back, so I say:

"For one smackeroo, friend, I will cut a deck with yuh."

He sighs and looks like he wishes he was some miles distant.

"Hopewell, it is hardly fair for you, a officer of the law, to take advantage of a jasper like me on my unlucky day, but leave us see yore dollar."

I slide to the ground and fish out my one and only dollar, which is a very worn bill with a smudge of ink across George Washington's nose. High-cut shuffles the cards and holds them out on the palm of his long-fingered hand. I cut first, and what do I get but the two of clubs. He cuts, and I see he has the three of clubs.

"See," he says, sad as he takes my dollar bill. "All day I have been gettin' nothin' higher'n a trey."

He walks away, leaving me staring at my empty hand and realizing that this also is indeed my unlucky day. Very unhappy, and no mistake, I remount and ride out of town toward "Wrap-around" Waggle's shack, which is not far from Skunk Creek and on beyond where Shoe-on Sorby lives.

COMING over a hill, I see there is a tall, slender gent bending over a campfire. Not far away, a paint hoss grazes, and a very handsome saddle lays in the sun. The hombre hears me coming and lifts his head. I see his face then under a very dapper sombrero, and I note that he carries two guns with bone handles which hang low against his long legs. I feel somewhat of a chill creep along my spine until I get a better look at his face.

His face, which is suntan and smooth, is no little filled with a pleasant smile, and I realize he cannot be more than twenty and that his eyes are brown and as friendly as a puppy wagging his tail.

"Howdy, mister," he says, like I am his brother which he has not saw for five years or so. "Light and eat a bite with me."

I catch a whiff of bacon and coffee and am reminded that suppertime is not far distant, so I light and approach the fire. He sees my badge and holds out a hand.

"Sheriff," he says, "it is indeed a pleasure to meet yuh. My name is Kid Killeen, and my pa was once connected with lawmen, and from him I inherit both my respect and love for lawmen and the two guns which I carry."

I shake his hand and explain that I am only the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, but that I am pleased to meet him. He pours a steaming cup of coffee and puts bacon and fried spuds on a tin plate for me.

"Deputy, or sheriff," he says, "yuh are a lawman, and therefore a true friend of the Killeens, includin' me. Incidental, I am right handy with a Colt and can shoot the tail off a grasshopper at twenty paces. Do yuh suppose yore sheriff could use a gunman like me?"

I shake my head. "Coyote County has no more need for a gunslinger than a hog needs a undershirt."

"I take it then that the sheriff and you are right good with guns."

I shake my head again. "Boo Boo Bounce couldn't hit the side of a barn with his forty-five. Besides, him being gun-shy, he would be afraid to try. Whenever he carries his six, yuh can be shore it is not loaded. As for me, I am not bad with a scattergun, but cannot hit nothin' with a revolver."

"Looks like yuh'd need a man like me, then."

"It is like this. Coyote County is as peaceful as six A.M. on Sunday morning."

"Must not be anything worth stealin'," he says, and grins.

"Well," I say, "we have got us a bank, but of course at this hour of the day, it is closed. Then there is Ton-thumb's safe. He runs a butcher shop and does not believe in banks, so he keeps his money in this safe. Also—"

"This Ton-thumb, no doubt, carries a gun?"

"No. Except for a butcher knife or two and a meat ax, he has no other weapon. Kid, Coyote County is law-abidin'."

HE SIGHS, and pours me a second cup of coffee.

"Deputy," he says, "I am no little sorry to hear this, for I had hopes of joinin' you and the sheriff in fightin' the lawless. I need money the worst kind, or the first thing you know, I will have to punch cows."

That is when I have a bright idea of how to make a hero of Boo Boo Bounce as well as let this nice gent earn money.

"The sheriff," I say, "has a very soft spot in his heart for the new schoolteacher, but she does not notice him, because bein' so fat, he is far from handsome and dashin'. But he believes that should somethin' happen what would make him a hero, Miss Lorenzen would be indeed pleased to be a friend of such as he. Should yuh ride into Polecat, shootin' yore sixes very noisy, and should Boo Boo arrest yuh, it would no doubt turn the trick."

"I would not care to be arrested," he murmurs. "Otherwise, the plan sounds very neat. Especially if there is two ten-dollar bills in it for me."

"Boo Boo could see that yuh escaped from the jail easy," I say. "As for the two ten-spots, to be a hero he will no doubt come across."

I fish around in a pocket and find paper and a pencil.

"I will write a note to Boo Boo," I say, "explainin' very precise this plan. You slip around and give it to him before yuh start shootin'. Incidental, I would not want any of the citizens killed. Especially voters."

"Do not worry about the voters." He grins.

I write a note to Boo Boo and add a P.S., which says:

Do not forget my ten-dollar bonus

Kid Killeen thrusts it into a pocket of his fancy shirt.

"Hopewell," he says, holding forth a hand, "here's to Boo Boo Bounce, the hero of Coyote County."

Upon this we shake very solemn. Realizing that the coffee and grub is all gone, I climb aboard my hoss and ride on to Wrap-around Waggle's place.

It is nigh onto dark when I get there, and Wrap-around is setting in front of his cabin, smoking a corn-cob pipe and looking no little content. He takes his pipe out from among his whiskers and says:

"Welcome, Hopewell."

"Wrap-around," I say, very business-like, "as the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., it is my painful duty to inform yuh that yuh was saw stealin' some twenty feet of string from Ton-thumb's butcher shop. Stealin', whether it is cows or wrappin' twine, is a serious offense, and no mistake. How would yuh like to spend some dozen-odd years in the cooler?"

I see a few beads of sweat glisten on his forehead.

"Hopewell," he says, "I would not like that, for I have a feelin' that in the cooler string-savin' would be frowned upon."

He sighs and puts his pipe back among his whiskers.

"Hopewell, I am a old man. For many years, I have been savin' string until now I reckon I have the biggest ball of saved-up string in the wide world. In fact, it is so big it will barely roll through the door. I would hate to go to the cooler now and not be able to reach my goal."

"Which is what?" I ask.

"Havin' a ball of string too big to go through the door."

"Then," I say, "yuh must quit stealin' string from around and about the stores. Also, yuh must give me back the twenty-odd feet yuh stole from Ton-thumb."

"Hopewell," he moans, "yuh break my heart!"

He gets to his feet and goes inside the shack. I follow. There in the middle of

the floor is the biggest ball of string you ever laid eyes on. You can see that it is made up of odds and ends of strings of all sizes and colors. Wrap-around finds the end of the first piece and unwinds it till he comes to a knot.

"This piece," he murmurs, "I found tangled in a chokeberry bush only a few minutes ago."

He unties it careful-like and then unwinds a longer piece.

"This is what I got at the butcher shop, Hopewell. It is a very lovely string, and I shore hate to part with it."

I take the string, wrap it up firm into a ball and thrust it into a pocket.

"Wrap-around," I ask, "do yuh know where yuh got each piece of string at?"

"Shore," he answers.

I am somewhat astounded at his memory and say so.

"Hopewell," he says, "there is politicians who can remember thousands of names. There is preachers who can remember ever' word in a sermon. Why is it so strange that I can remember where I got these numerous pieces of string?"

I CANNOT think of no reason why. After I make him promise again that he will not steal string which has never been used previous to tie up various objects, I climb into the saddle and start back toward Polecat.

It is now dark, but there shines a very handsome moon, and the night is delightful, and no mistake. So I begin to sing very carefree. By and by, I meet a gent riding a hoss. On second look, I see that he is nobody but Shoe-on Sorby, who is wide awake and not going no place in his sleep.

"For a minute, Hopewell," he says, "I thought there must be a herd of donkeys comin' my way, but it is only you singin'."

He laughs no little gusty at this very corny remark.

"Leave us not be so joky-fied about my singin'," I say, indignant. "Why are you not in the hay sound asleep, instead of ridin' around and about in the moonlight?"

He sobers instantaneous.

"Hopewell, I am afraid to go to bed and to sleep for fear I will walk in my sleep again tonight. Where I have been walkin' to in my sleep lately is a very dangerous proposition, and no mistake."

"What is so dangerous about it?" I ask.

He rides on without answering me, and I know here is a mystery which Boo Boo and me should look into. I resolve to tell Boo Boo about it as soon as I get back to Polecat.

But when I ride into town, I see something that makes me forget all about Shoe-on Sorby and his sleep-walking, for people are scurrying about with lanterns, and Ton-thumb's butcher shop is blazing very a-glitter with light, and there is much excitement in and about the place.

I rush up and see that Ton-thumb's safe stands wide open and Ton-thumb himself is beating his hands together and pacing about and swearing very fierce indeed.

"Where is that fat sheriff?" he bellows. "Ain't we got us no law in Polecat? What's the matter with the county? Why does everybody stand about and do nothin' when I have been robbed of every cent of my hard-earned money?"

Then he sees me and comes toward me, pointing a evil-looking butcher knife at my throat.

"Hopewell," he roars, "do somethin' quick before I lose my temper and cut out yore gizzard!"

I wish I was some place distant, but am not, so I say:

"Leave us watch our blood pressure. Exactly what has happened?"

"While I was settin' here, countin' up the day's take," he says, "a youngish

jasper, dressed very natty and packin' two bone-handled guns, walked in and helped himself to the cash in my safe. Before I could so much as get my hands on the meat ax, he was gone, ridin' out of town on a paint hoss. Then I rushed over to the jail, yellin' for Boo Boo. But he was no place about."

I recognize from his description that the robber is none other than Kid Killeen. Although I have a weakness in my knees, for I recall distinct of telling this Kid Killeen about Ton-thumb's safe, nonetheless I look Ton-thumb in the eyes very direct.

"Friend," I say, "I will take over in Boo Boo's place. Incidental, here is yore twenty-odd feet of string which—"

"To blazes with the string!" he screams. "If I don't get my money back, I will raise a strong holler about it, and no mistake!"

I hurry to the jail for my shotgun, strike a match, and light the lamp on the desk. Then I begin to hunt for shotgun shells in a drawer.

"Hopewell," a hoarse whisper says, "is that you?"

I recognize the whisper as belonging to Boo Boo Bounce.

"Boo Boo," I say, "where are yuh at?"

"Not so loud," he says. "I am locked in Cell Number Four."

I take the lamp and go back along the hall to Cell Number Four, and sure enough, there is Boo Boo behind bars, his eyes fastened upon me very glary.

"Let me out, lunkhead!" he says, which I do pronto.

HE SHOVES a paper under my nose, and I see it is the note I writ and sent with Kid Killeen.

"So yore friend is lookin' for a job!" he hisses. "So he comes here, and whilst I am readin' yore note, he shoves a gun into my ribs and locks me in my own jail. Then he goes and robs Ton-thumb, whilst I set very helpless behind bars with a empty gun in my holster."

"Why did yuh just set?" I retort. "If you would of yelled, someone would of let yuh out."

He turns somewhat pale.

"I could not let nobody know the perdicament I was in. I cannot be a hero to Miss Lorenzen under such circumstances. Hopewell, there is but one thing to do now. Take my gun and hit me over the head, thusly causin' a very big bruise. We will say that this jasper slipped up on me and knocked me out, which is why I did not come runnin' when Ton-thumb called for help. A man who has been knocked unconscious looks somewhat like a hero."

I take his gun and make ready to hit him.

"Leave us not strike too brisk," he says, shutting his eyes. "I would not want to wind up with a busted cranium."

Before I can hit him, he opens his eyes wide.

"Wait," he says, his face very pale. "I cannot stand to be hit from the front. I will turn around."

He turns around, and I say, "Brace yoreself, Boo Boo."

Just as I start to swing, his knees buckle, and he falls in a dead faint, hitting his head against the open door of the cell, thus saving me the trouble of popping him.

I get some water and douse him, and he opens his eyes and glares up at me very angry.

"I said not to hit me hard!" he says. "Hopewell, yuh are a idiot, besides bein' a traitor!"

Before I can explain to him that it was not me who hit him, he grabs up the six-gun and rushes outside. I follow. There is still quite a crowd about the butcher shop, and among them is the new teacher, Miss Lorenzen, looking very pretty, and no mistake.

Seeing her, Boo Boo makes a great fuss about this robbery and how Kid

Killeen knocked him out and he laid in the back of the jail unconscious all this time.

"Leave us not worry about yore unconsciousness," Ton-thumb says. "What I want is my money back!"

"Do not fret," Boo Boo says, casting a side glance at Miss Lorenzen. "No matter if I am half dead from a crushed skull, I will get this desperado, or my name ain't—"

At that moment, who should come rushing up and grabbing Boo Boo by the arm but old Wrap-around Waggle. His whiskers is flying brisk, and he is panting no little, and I see he is upset to the utmost.

"Boo Boo," he gasps, "I have been robbed!"

"Shut up!" Boo Boo says. "Can't yuh see I am a busy . . . Robbed, did yuh say?"

"Yes. Somebody has gone and stole my ball of string! Just when I have got it to the size where it is almost too big to go through the door, some low-down owlhooter—"

"String!" Boo Boo snorts in disgust. "What does a ball of string amount to?"

Then he sees Miss Lorenzen staring at him in mild disapproval. So he smiles fatherly at Wrap-around.

"Friend," he says, "no crime is too small for the attention of Boo Boo Bounce. Hopewell, come hither."

I do so, and he says, "Deputy, I will attend to stirring up a posse to search for Kid Killeen. You handle Wrap-around's case. Go look for clues and such, and run down this here string-swiper if it is the last thing yuh do."

I am no little pleased to be told to help Wrap-around find his string, for I figure that it is some youngster who needs a kite string who has stole this ball from Wrap-around. Besides, I am a married man and would not care to see my wife become a widow should I be forced to capture Kid Killeen.

SO WRAP-AROUND and me mount our hosses and head through the moonlight toward his place near Skunk Creek.

"How come," I ask him, "yuh was not to home this evenin' when the thief did his dirty work?"

"I thought this was Saturday," he answers, "and had went down to the creek for my bath. When I get back home, there is no nice big ball of string to greet me. No nothin'."

He begins to sob faintly.

"Keep up a stiff lip," I say. "Remember that so much string cannot be took very far without somebody noticin' it."

We arrive at his place, and I look around and about in the moonlight for clues, but find none, for the ground is very hard and dry. Presently, clouds cover the moon, so we give up and go into his cabin. Wrap-around is broken-hearted no little about his loss and brings out a jug of applejack for to console himself.

It is along toward morning when at last the jug is empty and I am ready to depart. Which I do.

The sun comes up in the east very handsome, and I realize that now begins a fine day. I feel like bursting into song, which I do until I happen to look groundward. What I see makes me choke on a utmost high note.

Stretched across by trail, running north and south as far as I can see, is a string. I follow it some little ways north and see a knot where this string is tied to another. It comes to me that here indeed is Wrap-around Waggle's ball of string stretched direct across country. Also, I have a hunch that should I follow the string, by and by it will lead me to whoever is the thief.

I ride up over a few hills, and there I see this string leading up to a door of a log cabin. The cabin belongs to no one but Shoe-on Sorby, and the string goes in right under the front door. I

slide from my hoss, stride to the door and open it.

From inside comes no few basso snores, and I see Shoe-on sleeping soundly on the bunk. As usual, he has on his shoes, and closer inspection reveals there is a length of string tied about his middle. Then I glance at the floor and am astounded to behold there is much string lying around and about, and I realize that Shoe-on has unwound Wrap-around's ball of twine and laid it about on the floor in such a way it will not become tangled.

I shake Shoe-on by a shoulder.

"Shoe-on," I yell, no little stern, "yuh have got some explainin' to do to the Law! Or else!"

He sets up, looks at me and then at the floor and knows that he is indeed in a tight spot, for I am frowning very harsh.

"Hopewell," he says, sad, "I will explain if yuh quit shakin' me loose from myself."

I desist, and he goes on, "It is like this. For five nights I have been walkin' in my sleep. Where I have went, I do not know. But each mornin', I find I have come home with a dollar bill.

"Now, Hopewell, this is very risky, going places and comin' home with a strange dollar. Yet I did not want to tell nobody of this on the off chance that I had discovered buried treasure, in which case, finders is keepers. So after yuh mentioned somethin' about Wrap-around's ball of string, I had a idea. I borrowed his string. Before retirin', I tied the end about myself, figurin' should I walk in my sleep this night, the string would drag along behind, but when I turned around to come home, it would no doubt tangle in some brush and bust. Thus leaving a trail, which I see it has did."

He reaches under his pillow and comes up with a dollar bill.

"Another'n!" he says hoarsely. "Hopewell, we have got to follow the string and learn the source of this here money."

He dresses rapid since he already has on his shoes, and soon we are on our way, following the string southward.

The string is indeed very long, reaching across the country over hills and through valleys, and it leads us direct to a wild plum thicket on the north bank of Skunk Creek. Here the string has become tangled and busted. No matter, we see where somebody has made a path into the thicket, which we follow very cautious.

We come to a flat rock. This we lift, and there beneath in a neat hole is a half-gallon glass fruit jar with a lid screwed on it. I lift out the jar, and there is no mistaking its contents. In it are many green strips of paper, which is nothing more or less than paper money.

"Buried treasure!" Shoe-on hisses.

I AM surprised to the utmost and cannot so much as let out a hiss. I unscrew the lid and shake out a handful of bills. One of them catches my eye, for across George Washington's nose is a familiar smudge of ink, and I recognize this as the dollar High-cut Harry won from me yesterday afternoon.

High-cut Harry, I recall, does not trust a bank or nobody, which is why-for he hides his money thusly. Also, I remember, High-cut is somewhat sensitive about various things and it is reported that he carries a small but mean derringer under his left arm. I feel a slight chill steal over me.

"We have got to put this back," I say. Then I explain how it is that the money is here, and ask, "How come yuh found this in yore sleep, Shoe-on?"

He does not know unless one time when he was sleepwalking, he ran across High-cut hiding the money here, and since then has been coming here and

getting a dollar at a time.

"No doubt," he adds, with no little dignity, "if I was not so honest a man, I would have took more than a dollar at a time."

"We must not touch this," I say, "or High-cut will—"

"When I am asleep, I cannot help touching it," he says.

For a moment, I am at a loss, but not for long. "I will take this matter up with High-cut and explain why he should ought to find himself another hidin' place," I say.

We hurry out of the plum thicket, and I start to untangle the string. Suddenly it gives a jerk. Then comes another jerk. Then it jerks no more whatsoever. "Somebody," I say wisely, "has crossed the string and snagged a toe on it and busted it. Leave us see if I am right."

We come to the break, which is near a clump of sage brush. "Ah, ha!" I say. "Shoe-on, I am right as usual."

I am about to bend over and look for tracks when we hear a groan. We look into the brush, and there lays a jasper tied up with rope. On his head, I see a very large bump, and a second look tells me he is none other than Kid Killeen.

He comes to and opens his eyes.

"Ah, ha!" I say. "So we have caught up with yuh!"

He does not deny this. Neither does he deny he robbed Ton-thumb, but he claims he knows nothing of where the money is at present.

"Bein' unfamiliar with the country," he says, "I got mixed up in my directions after it clouded over last night. When daylight come, I see I am headed the wrong way. Then what should happen but a masked man stepped out of these very bushes. After taking my saddle-bag in which the money is, he raps me over the head, and I know no more until now."

We hear hosses approaching and behold Boo Boo Bounce and a few-odd citizens of Polecat, including Ton-thumb, who looks very unhappy indeed when he learns another desperado has took his money. Also, he makes some caustic remarks about Boo Boo being a sheriff with less brains than it takes to come in out of the rain.

Boo Boo gives me a very dark look, and I know he is about to blame all upon me, his deputy, so I beat him to it by calling him to one side and telling about the string and how it leads to High-cut's jar of money. Boo Boo cannot think of but one thing at a time, so he forgets to blame me for the loss of Ton-thumb's money.

"Gents," he says, "if yuh will kindly take Kid Killeen in hand, Hopewell and me will do some further investigatin'."

The posse members is tired, and also anxious to get back to Polecat to open up their various businesses, so they gladly take the Kid and ride away with him. All but Shoe-on Sorby.

"I hope yuh will remove High-cut's money so's I will not again become a thief tonight while I am asleep," he says.

"We will do that, pronto," Boo Boo promises, and Shoe-on mounts his hoss and heads back home very content.

I help him into the saddle and start to get on my own hoss, and who should come hurrying up but old Wrap-around Waggle. "Have yuh found the skunk what stole my—" he begins.

THEN he sees the string on the ground, and his voice chokes off.

"Somebody has busted my prize string," he wails. "I got it from around a package five years ago last Christmas. It is the only red an' green twisted string I have got. An' somebody has run off with a good two feet of it!"

"That is indeed a shame and a pity, and no mistake," Boo Boo consoles.

Wrap-around begins to wind the string up in a ball.

"Leastwise," he says, "yuh two fine lawmen found my string and yuh may count on my vote at the next election."

Boo Boo and I thank him and ride on toward Skunk Creek. "Well," I say, "a vote is a vote."

He sighs as only a very fat man can sigh.

"True, Hopewell, but so far I have not made a hero of myself. I have not captured no desperado, nor recovered the stole money. Did yuh notice how Miss Lorenzen's lovely hair looks like spun gold in the sunlight? Did yuh notice how her teeth is like pearls, and her complexion is like peaches and cream? Also, she earns a very handsome salary of sixty smackeroos per month. Without doubt, two could live on that in a town such as Pole—"

He says no more for we have come to the plum thicket, and we see a pinto. It is High-cut Harry's hoss.

"This is indeed lucky." Boo Boo smiles. "We can tell High-cut here and now to hide his money elsewhere."

At that moment, High-cut comes out of the thicket empty-handed. He is no little surprised to see us.

"We have come to tell yuh to remove yore hidden wealth to some other location," Boo Boo says. "Yuh see—"

What else he says, I do not hear, for High-cut's hoss has turned about, and from the left hind hoss-shoe, I observe trailing a length of red and green twisted string.

"Thank yuh, Boo Boo," I hear High-cut say, very grateful. "I will immediately find another hidin' place."

He disappears into the thicket again, and I point out the string.

Boo Boo turns somewhat pale. "Deputy," he murmurs, "do yuh think it was he who robbed Kid Killeen?"

"There is a strong possibility it was he," I reply.

"Get yore shotgun ready," he says.

"I have not brung my shotgun."

His fat face grows all the paler.

"Hopewell, I do not have no shells along for my forty-five, and it is rumored that High-cut Harry packs a mean derringer beneath his arm. We are indeed in a very tight fix, and no mistake. Think of somethin', fast!"

I think, and sudden I have a no little bright idea. I slide from my hoss and ease over to High-cut's pinto and do something that is a very dirty trick indeed, which I would not do to nobody except a desperado such as High-cut is.

Presently, he comes out of the thicket, and I see now that not only does he have a jar full of money, but also a bulging saddle-bag, and I know for sure it is him who stuck up Kid Killeen. He fastens the saddle-bag to the saddle, snugs the jar under his arm and swings into the leather. That is when things happen rapid, and the next thing he knows, he knows nothing, for his pinto has throwed him a good ten feet.

"Hopewell"—Boo Boo smiles—"leave us keep it quiet how yuh put a cactus leaf beneath the saddle of the pinto. Leave us say that it was me who captured High-cut Harry single-handed. Incidental, here is a ten-dollar bonus, and should yuh not let out the truth of High-cut's capture, I shall not tell yore wife of the ten smackeroos."

We shake on this, no little solemn.

It is that same evening when I and my wife are setting on the front porch that we see Boo Boo Bounce and Miss Lorenzen walking by in the moonlight.

"What that pretty girl can see in a fat no-account like Boo Boo Bounce, I do not understand," my wife says.

"My dear," I say, running a hand into my pocket and caressing the ten-spot which Boo Boo has give me, "leave us not talk thusly about such a fine gentleman. Boo Boo is a great hero, and no mistake!"

To this, she merely snorts very loud indeed.

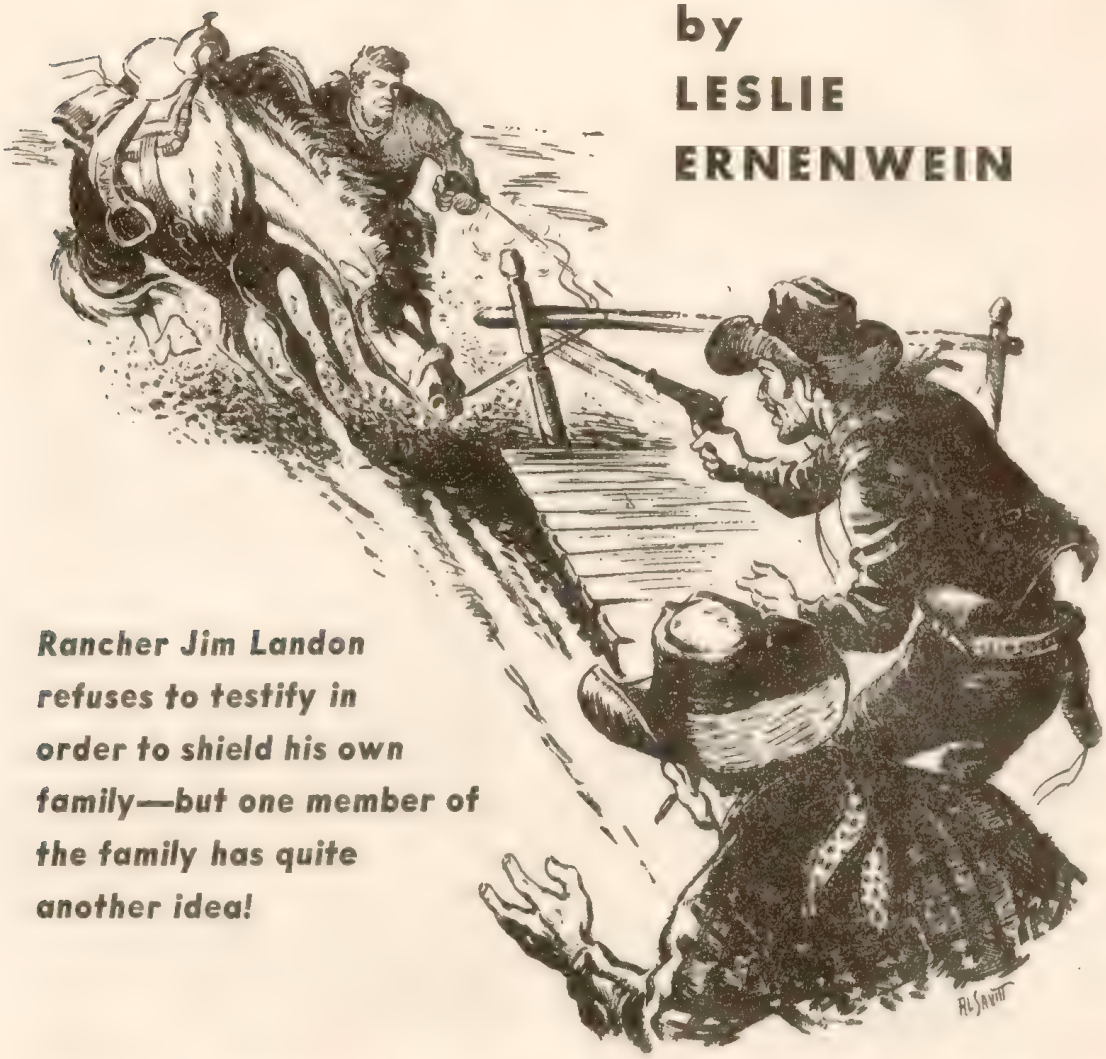
COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

1 WHO KILLED WILD BILL HICKOK—WHEN AND WHERE?
2 THE CHISHOLM TRAIL, ROUTE OF COUNTLESS CATTLE HERDS, IS FAMOUS IN SONG AND STORY. WHERE DID IT GET ITS NAME?
3 NAME THE ONLY SURVIVOR OF THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN, BETTER KNOWN AS CUSTER'S LAST STAND
4 WHAT WESTERNER WAS CALLED THE COLOSSUS IN BUCKSKIN?
5 WHAT FAMOUS GROUP OF PIONEERS TRAVELED THROUGH DEATH VALLEY?

The answers are on Page 187—IF YOU MUST LOOK!

PROPERLY PROTECTED

by LESLIE ERNENWEIN



Rancher Jim Landon refuses to testify in order to shield his own family—but one member of the family has quite another idea!

JIM LANDON was loading his wagon near the south rim of Humbolt Hill when he saw Sheriff Sam Crenshaw ride up the slope. The old lawman's star shone bright in the sunlight and his drooping mustache made a silver crescent against the tan of his face.

"Trouble," Landon thought.

Oxbow Basin had turned into a regular breeding ground for trouble these past few months. Which seemed odd, considering how much range there was and how few ranches shared it. There were only two on this side of the Basin besides his own—Jube Barstow's Boxed B and the Gault Brothers' Spade. But because those two were warrior outfits, each wanting to dominate the range, there was trouble aplenty.

Methodically, Landon continued loading the cedar posts which had taken a month's tedious toil to cut and trim.

There had been a time when Jim Landon would have scorned any job that couldn't be accomplished on horseback, a time when he had thought most of drinking and gambling and had worn a gun as constantly as he wore boots. He had scoffed at homesteaders then, wondering what queer urge prompted them to build homes and raise families against such tremendous odds.

But that was before he had met a girl named Linda; a gentle, gracious, sorrel-haired girl whose warm blue eyes had thoroughly bewitched him. Her face and form had been a magnet beyond all resisting.

Two years of marriage had tamed Jim Landon and changed him, so that he was glad to earn the extra money these posts would fetch at Fenwick's Mercantile in town. A homesteader with a wife and year-old son couldn't rely on the calf crop dropped by a small bunch of cows. He had to scheme and scrimp and earn a dollar any way he could come by it.

Landon wasn't thinking about money now, though. He was thinking about a killing, mentally bracing himself for the moment when Sheriff Sam Crenshaw would ride up to the wagon. And because his home and family meant more to him than life itself, Jim Landon clung stubbornly to the only hope he had, to the decision he had made three weeks ago.

"Howdy," Sheriff Crenshaw called.

LANDON nodded, wiped his perspiring face with a blue bandanna.

"Hot day," he said.

"Tol'able hot," Crenshaw agreed.

He turned in saddle and glanced down the slope. He sat like that for a long moment, as if calculating the distance.

"Good view of the stage road from here," he said presently.

Landon took out his Durham sack, neither accepting nor rejecting the lawman's declaration. He shaped up a cigarette and waited, knowing how this was going to be and deeply regretting it. A man had to hold his tongue, had to think about his wife and baby, saying nothing that would threaten their security.

"Tex Gault goes on trial tomorrow mornin' charged with killin' Fred Shumway," Crenshaw said, his bushy-browed eyes peering speculatively at Landon. "All we've got on him is circumstantial evidence, the fact he once threatened to chop Shumway down."

"So?" Landon said musingly, meeting the old lawman's gaze and not shifting from it.

"We need an eye witness," Crenshaw said, "otherwise the jury is liable to turn Tex loose. Then there'll be more shootin's."

"Shouldn't wonder," Landon agreed, for Shumway had been ramrod of Boxed B, and so Jube Barstow's crew would be wanting revenge.

A scowl deepened the lines on Crenshaw's craggy face. He glanced down the hill again.

"Shumway was killed right down there in the road at about this same time of day," he muttered. Then, turning his sharp, inquisitive gaze upon Landon, he demanded, "Why ain't you spoke up, son?"

Landon butted his cigarette on a wheel rim, taking care to smudge it out completely before discarding it.

"What would I speak up about?" he asked finally.

"About seein' Tex Gault kill Shumway. I've done considerable watchin', Jim. I've timed yore last six trips to town and they ain't varied by more'n fifteen or twenty minutes. Yuh brought in a load of posts the day Shumway was shot. The Tucson stage picked up his body and passed yuh on yore way to town."

Landon said nothing. What, he thought grimly, was there to say? He couldn't deny being here at the speci-

fied time. Crenshaw had that on him for sure. And he disliked telling a bald-faced lie.

"Well?" the lawman prompted impatiently.

Landon's long lips remained stubbornly clamped, his lean, sweat-greased face stolidly unrevealing.

"Yuh ain't denyin' yuh saw it, are yuh?" Crenshaw demanded.

Landon shrugged. He wouldn't have played this evasive, cautious game three years ago. He had despised cautious men, considering them cowards, afraid to say what they thought.

"I'm not talkin', Sam," he said presently. "It hasn't been easy, keepin' out of trouble on this side of the basin. I've had to watch out all the time. I've stayed clear by mindin' my own business. If the Boxed B and the Spade want to kill each other off, so be it."

"Just like I thought!" Crenshaw exclaimed. "You saw it and was afraid to say so!" He grasped Landon's sweat-soaked sleeve. "I don't blame any man for wantin' to keep out of trouble, Jim. But this is a case of cold-blooded killin'. Tex Gault would never of faced Fred Shumway in a fair fight. Tex made big talk, but he never backed it up when Fred called his bluff. That's why I know plumb well that Shumway didn't have a chance to defend himself. I might of been able to prove it if that stage driver and his half-witted passengers hadn't tromped out all the sign."

Landon listened, showing no interest until Crenshaw took a folded document from his pocket and said, "This is a subpoena."

The sheriff started downslope. He turned in saddle and called:

"Yuh've already been listed as a witness for the prosecution. Be in court at nine o'clock tomorrer mornin'. . . ."

IT WAS midafternoon when Jim Landon drove into Apache Junction. The cowtown, which attracted most of its trade from the east side of the basin, lay quiet and seemingly deserted in the oppressive August heat. Five saddled horses stood in drooping patience at the Cattle King Saloon hitchrack. Three of them, Landon noticed, wore Spade brands, which meant that Luke Gault and his two riders were in town.

"Come to call on Tex, and tote him a drink," Landon thought, and wondered if that trio had heard the news about him being a witness.

He guessed they had, and that supposition was a weight on his sweat-sogged shoulders as he unloaded the fence posts behind the Mercantile. For two years ago Luke Gault had given him to understand that the Spade was boss of West Basin.

John Fenwick, the merchant-mayor of Apache Junction, greeted Landon with more than usual friendliness.

"I hear yuh're to be the star witness at Gault's trial," he announced. "I'm pleased, Jim—mighty pleased."

"I've been subpoenaed," Landon admitted.

Fenwick paid him, counting the bills and each silver coin precisely.

"There's been altogether too much rough stuff goin' on up yore way lately," he complained. "It's time we respectable citizens took a firm stand against such goin's on."

A deep-rooted cynicism quirked Jim Landon's lips. It was easy for Fenwick to talk about taking a stand. He lived in a house surrounded by the homes of other influential citizens and protected by a sheriff who spent most of his time in town. Fenwick had no fences to be cut, no unguarded haystacks to be burned. There wouldn't be much likelihood of Spade riders sending bullets through his windows of an evening.

"I'd like some chocolate candy for my wife," Landon said, "and a teethin' ring for little Billy."

Fenwick sighed, getting the point at once.

"I see," he said. He filled the small order and accepted payment before he added, "I know what's botherin' yuh, Jim. But there would be no such things as law and order and justice if honest men didn't stand up for 'em. Every man, woman and child in Oxbow Basin knows yuh're honest, that yore word can be relied on. What yuh say in court tomorrer will be believed. And I'm shore Sheriff Sam would see that you and yore family are properly protected."

Properly protected!

Jim Landon was tempted to laugh out loud, to ask how Sheriff Crenshaw would propose to protect a lone homestead ten miles from town. How many nights would he spend guarding haystacks? What sort of protection would he devise against stray bullets fired at night?

"I'll protect my own," Landon said soberly, "in my own way."

And presently, as he drove from the wagon yard, Landon took satisfaction in knowing that neither Sheriff Crenshaw nor the prosecuting attorney could force him from the way he had chosen to protect his home.

They couldn't prove that he had seen the killing, couldn't browbeat him into admitting it.

Landon glanced at the Cattle King Saloon, half expecting to see Luke Gault standing on the stoop. The Spade boss was brassy enough to challenge him here on Main Street, to warn him against testifying. Then, seeing that the three Spade horses were gone from the hitchrack, Landon loosed a sigh of relief. Gault might not have heard about him being a witness.

The team of bays had topped the first steep grade west of town when Landon saw three riders ease out of the brush, so near that he recognized them at once as being Luke Gault, Lee Kiley and "Red" Swanson. A self-mocking smile twisted Landon's lips as he halted his horses. He had been a fool to think Gault hadn't heard the news, or that the Spade boss would fail to threaten him.

The huge, black-bearded cowman rode up to the wagon, flanked by his two riders.

"I hear yuh're goin' to be a witness at my brother's trial," he said.

JIM LANDON nodded, saying nothing as he met Gault's probing gaze. There was arrogance in those black eyes, and in the big man's bull-toned voice.

"What was yuh figgerin' to tell?" he demanded.

The brashness of it angered Jim Landon. He had taken this sort of bulldozing from the Spade and the Boxed B riders for two years, but he hadn't learned to like it.

"Yuh didn't see nothin'," Gault insisted, "and yuh'd better not say yuh did!"

"Not if yuh like livin' in Oxbow Basin," Lee Kiley added.

Landon looked at this reed-thin rider, understanding his urgent interest, understanding also how surely he would back it with bullets. Red Swanson, youngest of the trio, said nothing. But the bone-handled gun he wore in a greased, half-breed holster was more eloquent than words. Contemplating these three men, Landon recalled Mayor Fenwick's mealy-mouthed talk of proper protection, and was more sure than ever that his own way was best.

"Well?" Gault demanded. "How about it?"

Landon looked him squarely in the eye.

"I've kept my mouth shut for three weeks," he said. "I aim to keep it shut."

Gault sighed, a slow smile rutting his heavy cheeks.

"That's what I wanted to hear. I knowed well enough yuh didn't see nothin', Landon, but sometimes a man will get to imaginin' things, especially when a smart prosecutin' attorney gets

aholt of him. You stick to cuttin' fence posts and leave the chin chatter to them town dudes. A homesteader can't afford to cause bad feelin' with his nearest neighbor. It might bring him all sorts of bad luck."

"Yeah," Landon said soberly. "That's how it looks to me."

The Spade men rode toward town then, and Landon drove on across the ridge. It went against a man's pride to knuckle under as he had done. It made him squirm inside. But there was no alternative. You couldn't make a living for your family and fight outfits like the Spade.

Yet even so, knowing that he had done the wise thing, Jim Landon felt a trifle sick at his stomach; the way he had felt when he had seen Fred Shumway die in the dust of the stage road three weeks ago. He had tried to tell himself then that Shumway was no friend of his. But the killing had been what Sheriff Crenshaw had called it—a deliberate killing.

Landon was thinking about that part of it when he drove down the long slope that led to his homestead. Unconsciously, with no intention of doing so, he weighed the worth of justice against the value of his home. Not money value, for there was little enough of that. The log house had cost practically nothing, beyond the toil of building it.

But there was more to a home than cash value—the priceless possessions of happiness and security. Linda had been fulfillment of all his romantic dreams when he married her, satisfying his every want and desire. Now the fulfillment was twofold, amazingly enhanced and doubled by little Billy.

These were the things a man had to balance against the nagging need for telling the truth. He wondered what Linda would say if he told her about it. She was quite a hand for Bible reading, and set considerable store by such things as paying just debts and doing charitable deeds. But there was no use worrying her about this deal.

She met him at the gate, as she always did, carrying Billy. It was coming sundown now and her face, so sweetly dimpled with smiling, held a peach-bloom glow.

"Supper's ready and waiting," she announced, watching him unhitch the team.

Landon handed her the candy.

"Sweets to sweets," he said, and was offering young Billy the teething ring when Linda exclaimed:

"No, Jim! Not until it's been dipped in boiling water."

That was Linda. Always looking out for Billy. And for her husband, too. She didn't have much size, as homesteaders' wives went, but there was a lot of gumption to her, and an astonishing amount of strength in her small body.

AFTER supper, while Landon dried the dishes, he said:

"Saw Sheriff Crenshaw today. Wants me to show up at the trial tomorrer."

"So?" Linda prompted, wanting more details.

"Guess I'll ride in, but don't see much sense to it," Landon went on casually. "A man would be a fool to jawbone himself into trouble about a thing that don't concern him."

Linda didn't say anything for a time. She went on washing dishes and keeping an eye on Billy who sat in his high chair with the new teething ring clutched in chubby fingers.

"Don't you think a man should tell the truth, Jim?" she finally asked.

"Shore," Landon agreed, sorry now that he had brought the subject up at all. She might ask him if he actually had seen anything that would help convict Gault.

"You'll be under oath," Linda reminded. "You'll be sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, so help you."

Linda hung up the dishpan.

"A man who'd lie under oath—well, he just wouldn't be much of a man, would he Jim?" she said thoughtfully.

Landon thought about it for a long moment, conscious that the squirming feeling was back again. Only now it was worse, with Linda's blue eyes on him.

"No," he said, "I don't suppose he would be."

Linda smiled. "I've always been prideful, Jim," she said, "and I guess you're the same."

Jim Landon knew then that his wife had done what Crenshaw and Fenwick had failed to do—what even a prosecuting attorney could not have done. And, knowing, he wondered if he would be standing here wiping dishes tomorrow night.

Linda took Billy off to bed, and Landon lifted his gun gear from its peg near the kitchen door and went out to the barn. Linda might become alarmed if she saw him wearing his gun tomorrow morning, so he placed it in his saddlebags. Then, recalling how long a time it had been since he had used a gun, he went back to the kitchen and took a box of cartridges from the catch-all shelf. Luke Gault's temper might get the best of him tomorrow. It would be well to get in some target practise on the way to town.

He was thinking about that when he went to bed and it was the first thing he thought of when he awoke.

At breakfast Linda looked at him questioningly.

"Are you worried about anything, Jim?" she asked.

He shook his head, forcing a grin. "Not a worry in the world," he lied.

"Worrying," Linda said, "is such a waste." Yet when she kissed him goodby Landon thought she looked worried herself.

Halfway up the slope Landon turned and waved, savoring this picture of his wife and son and home. Savoring, too, the bitter realization that Linda had forced him to risk it all for the sake of truth. He had been confident when he had ridden down this ridge late yesterday, believing he had fashioned a sturdy shield of protection for his family. But now there would be no shield against vengeance-prodded riders skulking in the darkness. Unless—

Abruptly then, Jim Landon rode up the ridge. There might be one way, if he was fast enough with a gun. And a trifle lucky. Topping the crest he dismounted, made a practise draw, and cursed its slowness. But the bullet he fired at a tree trunk target struck its mark almost dead center. Landon drew and fired, over and over again, until only five shells remained in the box. Then, because his draw had seemed a trifle faster each time, he reloaded the gun and rode confidently toward town.

THE courtroom was crowded, and hot. Tobacco smoke hung in a wavering blue ribbon above the heads of spectators who listened attentively to Clark Biddle, the prosecuting attorney.

"There is no doubt in my mind as to the guilt of this defendant!" he shouted, mopping his flushed face with a handkerchief.

Jim Landon watched the jury. Those men, he sensed, weren't too much impressed by Biddle's talk. Some of them were small ranchers, like himself. With nothing more than circumstantial evidence to go on they would be thinking of what the Spade riders might do to their fences and haystacks.

"You have heard reliable witnesses testify that they heard Gault threaten to shoot Fred Shumway," the prosecutor proclaimed. Then, without warning, Biddle announced, "We have one eyewitness, gentlemen. A man you all know as honest and dependable—Jim Landon!"

Sheriff Crenshaw administered the

oath. Landon remembered what Linda had said last night, and took courage from that memory—"a man who'd lie under oath wouldn't be much of a man."

Almost at once then he was telling what he had seen. All of it, sparing no detail.

"Shumway seemed to be arguing with Lee Kiley about somethin'. He wasn't even lookin' at Gault when Gault drew and fired three shots at him."

For a hushed instant no one spoke nor moved. Then the judge gave an order to Sheriff Crenshaw.

"Arrest Lee Kiley for withholding testimony from this court!"

Crenshaw stalked into the audience, arresting Kiley and taking him around to the jail entrance. "That makes one less," Landon thought, and when Biddle thanked him for testifying, asked to be excused.

Sheriff Crenshaw came back into the courtroom as Landon neared the doorway.

"I'm glad yuh changed yore mind, Jim," he said, and went on up front.

But there was no gladness in Jim Landon as he glimpsed Luke Gault and Red Swanson sitting in a rear seat. The unblinking gaze of their eyes made a steady pressure against him.

"They'll follow me outside," he thought.

The judge's voice, instructing the jury, carried to the sidewalk, precise and solemn.

"In view of the testimony you have just heard, gentlemen, your verdict should be — must be — guilty as charged!"

Landon was at the hitchrack, removing his holstered gun from the saddlebags when he noticed that his team of bays and wagon stood in front of the Mercantile, diagonally across the street. Why, he wondered, had Linda driven into town? She had said nothing about wanting to attend the trial. A crowded courtroom was no place for a woman with a baby in her arms.

Then, as footsteps sounded behind him, Landon turned. He had the gunbelt buckled now and observed an expression of surprise in Luke Gault's black eyes as the big cowman snarled:

"So yuh was goin' to keep yore mouth shut!"

"I changed my mind," Landon said and, seeing Red Swanson move up beside Gault, felt a rising sense of uncertainty.

He had hoped for a chance at Gault alone, believing he might outshoot the big cowman. Especially if Gault was flustered by a fit of temper. But there would be no chance against two guns. No chance at all.

"Yuh've got till tomorrer noon to pack up yore rubbish and leave Oxbow Basin," Gault announced in a rage-prodded voice. "After that yore homestead won't be healthy to live at."

The Spade men turned away then, heading toward the Cattle King. Landon was tempted to let them go, to accept this chance of postponing the showdown. But almost at once he remembered that he had brought the gun with him for the purpose of protecting his home, so that there would be no stray bullets breaking his windows at night.

"I'm not leavin', Gault!" he called.

Then, knowing that his only chance of survival depended on whatever degree of surprise he could engender in these men, he called sharply:

"Grab yore gun, Gault—grab right now!"

LUKE GAULT stopped in stride, turning and drawing so swiftly that Jim Landon's action seemed slow by comparison. Gault fired as his gun cleared leather, fired a split second sooner than he should have, for the bullet whined past Landon waist high. Jim fired twice, those rapid explosions merging with a louder blast.

"Swanson's gun!" he thought.

Seeing Gault go down, Landon peered through powdersmoke at the Spade rider. But he didn't fire at Swanson. He just stood there and stared in astonishment as the redhead floundered back against a building. Swanson dropped his gun, clutched his right shoulder.

"I'm out—I'm out!" he yelled.

Jim Landon couldn't comprehend it. He was remotely aware of men rushing from the courthouse, of excited voices and a queer, breathless sense of exhaustion. He hadn't fired at Swanson, yet the redhead was wounded. It didn't make sense to Landon until he heard Linda call: "Jim!"

Then he turned, seeing her standing in the wagon with a Winchester in her slim hands. "Linda!" he exclaimed.

He ran toward the wagon, seeing Linda put down the gun and take little Billy from a basket in the wagon bed.

ON THE long ride home, Jim Landon listened soberly as his wife explained her trip to town.

"Sheriff Crenshaw stopped by the house yesterday after he'd talked to you," she confessed. "He told me the outcome of the case depended on your testimony. I wanted you to testify, Jim. But after you left this morning I—well, I got to worrying."

" 'Worryin' is such a waste,' " Landon quoted grinningly, his left arm tight about her. Then, as sudden realization came to him, Landon laughed heartily.

"What's so comical?" Linda demanded.

"Me," Landon chuckled. "I worried calluses on my noggin about protectin' you. But in the end I was the one who got protected." He kissed her, and as the wagon rolled down the long slope toward home, he added, "Properly protected."

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The LAW-BRINGERS

SHERIFF PAT GARRET

Billy the Kid dropped the gun and fell forward

A saga of Frontier justice in the days when badmen ran riot

By FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

IN THE spring of 1880 there was no law beyond the Pecos River.

Over that wild land west of the Llano Estacado a few big cattlemen held sway in very much the same manner as the rude old barons who gave Europe a hard name during the Middle Ages. They raided one another's herds, and when they wanted to get rid of an enemy they ordered him slain. To their banners, upraised in wars for range, flocked men who had been outlawed in older communities for deeds of blood.

Of those who believed in the law there were a few, and in Lincoln County they had succeeded in electing their candidate for sheriff. Pat Garret was his name, a former buffalo hunter from the Staked Plain. But when he took the office he found himself unable to raise a posse against the most notorious of the desperados upon whose heads the government of the territory had set a price.

Then, on a raw day in the early spring, this outlaw whom men called Billy the Kid rode down from the Mescalero

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Mountains to talk business with Pat Coghlin, the Cattle King of Tularosa.

In the home ranchhouse at Three Rivers the ruddy-faced old Irishman, whose herds ranged over two hundred miles of arid flats and pine-clad peaks, received the beardless youth who carried a thousand dollars and the blood of eighteen dead men on his head. And after supper was over they sat at the oilcloth covered table with the bottle of whisky between them while the Scotch couple who did the work about the place sat by and listened to their dickering.

The outlaw sat slouched in his chair, lank-haired, more than a trifle ragged, as negligently graceful as a cat, as he went on to tell of the project that had brought him here.

"Big young steers," he said, "and they'll be hog fat when the grass comes."

"Beef's going down this spring," Pat Coghlin announced, "and them cow-men of the Canadian is hell at looking after strays."

Desperado and Rancher Discuss Plans

So they had it back and forth while George Nesbeth, the Scotch caretaker, rested after the day's work and his wife finished the supper dishes. Such deals were very common in those times; and the Cattle King of Tularosa was a power from Las Cruces clear to Santa Fe; the outlaw was accustomed to riding unchallenged where he willed.

In the end they came to an agreement. The cow-man was to buy all the Panhandle steers that his guest could deliver within the limits of his far-flung dominions. From Portales Lake at the breaks of Llano Estacado to the military post at Fort Stanton, where Pat Coghlin sold beef by contract to the Government was a long way further than the most vengeful of owners had dared to follow rustlers in the lawless land west of the Pecos. It looked like a good bargain for the Cattle King. As for Billy the Kid, why it took money to play monte and buy cartridges.

A year went by. Elsewhere the story has been told how the cowmen of the Panhandle sent a dozen young warriors on the trail of the herd which the outlaw had rounded up at Portales Lake, and how half the band joined forces with Sheriff Pat Garret to hunt down the thieves.

It was in December when they captured Billy the Kid at Stinking Springs after slaying two of his companions. Now in early March he was lying in jail under sentence of death for an old killing, when three of those warriors of the Canadian rode into the nest of mountains where Fort Stanton lies.

Ever since their comrades had departed on the manhunt with Pat Garret they had been seeking tidings of the lost herd. In White Oaks they had got a hint which pointed toward the military reservation. Now they reined up their ponies on the parade-ground. On the fence before them hung a row of green hides. They read the brands of their employers on them.

Siringo Rides Out Alone

Two of the trio returned to White Oaks, and Charley Siringo, the wagon-boss, rode on alone into the country where Pat Coghlin ruled like an old feudal baron and stock was wandering before the raw spring winds. Now and again he paused to read the brands in a bunch or turned aside to seek out a band in some foothill canyon.

By the time he reached Tularosa he had gathered much information concerning the methods of the Cattle King. Here they told him Pat Coghlin was away hunting rustlers.

"The ol' man done struck off towards the Rio Grande," they said. "Like's not you'll find him over at Las Cruces." So he took the trail across the White Sands

Desert, passed the Organ Mountains and crossed the lower reaches of the Jornado del Muerto. In Las Cruces he met the Cattle King of Tularosa and revealed to him his errand.

They talked the matter over, and Coghlin gave his promise to butcher no more Panhandle steers.

Such transactions were common enough in a day when most of the big-cow-men bought openly from rustlers. If the visitor came to you well organized, it was cheaper to let him recover his property than to show fight; you charged the salvaged animals to profit and loss and let it go at that. So Charley Siringo saw no reason to question the good faith of the big Irishman.

He rode away from Las Cruces. In Three Rivers he stopped overnight at the Coghlin ranch and Mrs. Nesbeth cooked his supper. After the meal Siringo sat talking with her and her husband, George. Billy the Kid's name was mentioned by the guest, and they told him of the bargain which they had overheard in this room a year before.

The wagon boss departed for White Oaks the next morning. He had traveled for some hours and was well up in the mountains when he learned more concerning the methods of the Cattle King of Tularosa.

Bushwhackers Have a Try

Where the trail described a long loop on the flank of a snow-clad peak, his horse went down in a heap and he heard the flat report of a Winchester above him. A second shot sounded just as he was leaving the saddle. He fell over a low shelf of rock and lay there with his revolver in his hand while the two Mexicans who had been sent to kill him peeped over a clump of brush.

Finally they rose and went across the ridge. It was evident that they believed they had got him. He allowed them to depart under that impression and made his way back to White Oaks, where a letter from the Nesbeths reached him a few days later telling him that Pat Coghlin was continuing to butcher the Panhandle cattle.

All of these facts Charley Siringo wrote to Bill Moore, the manager of the L X outfit. When the tidings reached Tascosa, the cattlemen of the Canadian held a conference. It was plain to see that so long as this sort of thing continued in New Mexico they might send forth their fighting men every winter but every spring would find a fresh crop of rustlers to replace those whom the warriors had exterminated. They decided that it was time to bring the law west of the Pecos River.

April saw another horseman riding alone through the wild dominions of the Cattle King of Tularosa. He made a splendid figure, for he was well over six feet in height, broad-shouldered, straight as a young pine tree. And if you looked into his blue eyes you knew that once he started for a goal he meant to reach it.

His name was John W. Poe. During the Seventies, the buffalo hunters knew him as one to whom it was no feat of marksmanship to break a bull's neck at six hundred yards. At Fort Griffin, he impressed the populace by disarming Jimmy Oglesby, a noted bad man from the Indian Territory, with his bare hands.

The people chose him for town marshal in '78, and as time went on he enhanced his prestige by many deeds of quiet boldness.

One wild night, he stood alone between a mob which filled the main street and his prisoner whom they had come to lynch. Before his calm inflexibility the armed crowd wavered and melted away. He came to Mobeetie on the Canadian in 1880, and the cattlemen picked him to carry the law, in which he placed so deep a faith, into this coun-

try to the west where men were making mock of it.

Poe Goes to the Pecos

For a large man he was remarkably unobtrusive. When he came to White Oaks, he made the journey, as it were, by the back door. Wherefore it happened that none of Pat Coghlin's henchmen knew of his presence.

Of the law-loving men who lived beyond the Pecos there were a few who knew something of his comings and goings. Sheriff Pat Garret met him in more than one quiet conference. The officer in charge of the military post at Fort Stanton talked with him. George Nesbeth and his wife told him their story under the Cattle King's nose in Three Rivers. In Las Cruces he showed his data to A. J. Fountain, the lawyer whom he had retained to help prosecute Pat Coghlin.

These and others were beginning to hope for a day when outlaws would take to cover. Poe had rounded up enough facts to convince the most timid of grand juries of the Cattle King's part in the conspiracy. In fifteen days more the hangman would meet Billy the Kid at the gallows steps. That was the propitious state of affairs on the twenty-eighth day of April, when something happened which changed all plans and dashed high hopes.

That morning Sheriff Pat Garret left Lincoln to confer with John W. Poe in White Oaks. Before he departed, he went to the two-story adobe building which had been Murphy & Dolan's store and entered the room on the upper floor where Billy the Kid was lying with irons on his wrists and ankles and two jailers watching him. The prisoner looked up as the sheriff spoke to Bob Ollinger who was on guard.

"Bob, I'm going over to White Oaks," Garret announced, "and while I'm away" —he made a little gesture to include J. W. Bell, the other jailer, who happened to be in the room at the time—"I want you boys to keep just twice as close a watch as you have kept before."

Two Bitter Foes

Bob Ollinger laughed grimly. Ever since the early days of the Lincoln County war he and the desperado had been bitter enemies.

"Don't worry, Pat." He rose and turned with a double-barreled shotgun in his hand. His eyes were fixed on the prisoner.

"There's eighteen buckshot in each of these barrels, and I reckon the man that catches them will know it." He patted the weapon, and when he was replacing it, the outlaw called his name.

"Bob, better be careful or you might get those buckshot yourself." Billy the Kid was smiling as he said it. Pat Garret's lids drooped a little lower, and he spoke through tight lips.

"Remember, boys. Twice as careful." He nodded to the prisoner. "So-long." Then he left them to make his journey to White Oaks.

The guards settled down to the day's monotonous routine. Bob Ollinger resumed his seat facing the cot where his charge lay shackled hand and foot. A good three yards of floor-space separated them.

Several cowboys were playing cards out in the hallway at the head of the stairs. The lank-haired outlaw stole a glance at Ollinger now and then from the cot, and his lips curved, showing his big buck teeth. It was as if the sight of his jailer aroused pleasant speculations.

So the day passed. At five o'clock in the afternoon Bell appeared to take his turn on watch. Ollinger gave up his chair and called to the cowboys.

"All right, boys; suppertime." They followed him down the stairs and across

the street to a little Mexican eating-house.

Bell Guards the Kid

Bell sat in the arm-chair watching the hand-cuffed, long-haired boy. In the room's dimness the face on the cot showed sharp and white. In part that pallor came from the long confinement; but starvation had heightened it. During the last few weeks Billy the Kid had eaten next to nothing. Men thought it was because he had the hangman on his mind.

"There's a Las Cruces paper came today," he said. "I wisht you'd leave me read it." Bell smiled and rose to get the weekly which the cowboys had left. When he returned the prisoner's hands were beneath the bedclothes.

"One of them punchers was saying something about a shooting down Three Rivers way. Find that item for me, will you? I can't make out to turn the pages with these hobbles on me." The big teeth were revealed by another boyish smile.

Bell unfolded the paper. Its outspread pages formed a screen between them. Then Billy the Kid performed a maneuver which he had been practising ever since he had starved himself to sufficient leanness. The good-natured deputy suddenly glanced up over the paper's top to see the outlaw's eyes looking down into his own less than a foot away.

Bell reached toward his revolver. Before the movement was fairly begun the prisoner's hand, now freed from its manacles, had grasped the weapon and plucked it from the holster.

The chair went over with a crash. The deputy turned to flee. Billy the Kid allowed Bell to reach the door before he pulled the trigger. The air within the close walls shook before the explosion. Bell staggered out through the doorway and fell headlong down the stairs. He was dead when he reached the bottom. Old Geiss, the jailer, was sitting on the lowest step. The body struck him. He ran into the street shouting the alarm.

Ollinger Rushes Forth

The party in the little eating house had heard the shot. Bob Ollinger sprang to his feet, rushed out, and ran on across the roadway. A thin, high voice above his head halted him.

"Hello, Bob."

It came from a window on the second floor of the adobe courthouse. Bob Ollinger looked up. The double-barreled shotgun, which had been the subject of their grim repartee that same morning, was slanting down toward him. Behind the barrels gleamed Billy the Kid's smiling face. The weapon roared, and Bob Ollinger pitched forward dead.

It took Billy the Kid two hours to file his leg shackles, for he went at the work very deliberately there on the little balcony. More than a score of well-armed men were gathered in a tight pack across the street. None of them raised a hand to stop him. Two cartridge belts swathed his body, and two six-shooters dangled on his hips; he kept a Winchester standing beside him.

So, when he had released his limbs, one hurried to saddle up a pony. They all stood by while he mounted, and there were some who cheered him as he rode away. Those were hard days.

In White Oaks on the day after the jail break Pat Garret was talking with John W. Poe when a messenger rode up and told them what had happened. The two men stood silent until the rider had finished his story.

"I'll saddle up and strike out for Lincoln," Pat Garret said in his habitual undertone. Poe nodded and they parted.

Garret Follows Trail

The sheriff returned to the county seat to take up the outlaw's trail and

follow it to the flanks of El Capitan Peak. There it vanished so completely that the Apache trackers whom he got from the Mescalero agency were unable to find any trace of it.

There were many men in New Mexico who sympathized with the fugitive. Some of them genuinely believed that the big cowmen, who had openly allied themselves with rustlers and professional gunfighters, were the real culprits. The posses which Pat Garret led forth from Lincoln traveled through a land where every other man was either hostile to the law or afraid to give its officers a word of information. So May went by and June, and Billy the Kid was still at large. Men spoke his name in undertones and looked over their shoulders when they uttered it. And they laughed at the law. They said there was no law beyond the Pecos.

In the meantime John W. Poe kept on about his business of getting evidence against the Cattle King of Tularosa. When he came back to White Oaks one day early in July the witnesses were listed, the warrants were sworn out, the case was complete down to the last little detail.

He was walking down the mining town's crowded street that afternoon when an old-timer by the name of George Graham fell in beside him. Whisky and faro had bested Graham. On this day, however, he was cold sober.

"Come on," Graham said. "I want to talk to you." He led the way to a secluded spot.

"Now," Graham announced, "I know your business in this country, and I got something to tell you." He lowered his voice. "The other night, I was sleeping in Dedrich Brothers' Livery Stable. They used to be in business with the Kid, those fellows, rustling cattle. I heard three of 'em talking about the Kid. He's been near White Oaks twicet lately, and right now he's holed up at Fort Sumner. I thought the information might come in handy."

Poe Informs Garret

They parted, and on the next day John W. Poe journeyed to Lincoln and told what he had heard to Pat Garret who didn't believe Graham's story. The sheriff shook his head.

"Not a chance in a thousand," he declared, "but if you say so, I'll go. We'll pick up my deputy, Kip McKinney, over in Roswell."

They rode down from Lincoln to the valley of the Pecos, got McKinney and the three set forth, but though they thought it was a wildgoose chase they took the precaution of riding out from Roswell in the direction of the county-seat. For they did not propose to let their purpose be known in a country where scores of riders were ready to risk their lives to carry warning to the outlaw.

When they had traveled for some miles out into the hills they struck off to the northward toward the abandoned military post. They avoided the beaten trails; they made detours past every ranch-house and sheep-camp. They rode hard, and the evening of the second day found them encamped in the sandhills, six miles from Fort Sumner.

In the morning they held a conference. Both Pat Garret and Kip McKinney were well known in the settlement at the abandoned post. So it fell to Poe to ride into town and find out what he could.

"Go to Beaver Smith's store," Pat Garret told him. "Most everybody hangs out there. If you don't find anything you might go on to Rudolph's, seven miles out on the Las Vegas road. He's a friend of mine. Good man. I'll give you a note to him. If you can't get back here by dusk, why, there's a double row of cottonwoods runs out for two miles from the post at the other side of town. Me

and Kip will ride over and meet you at the far end of it."

Rides into Fort Sumner

When Poe rode up to old Beaver Smith's store at Fort Sumner that morning there was no one in sight save the grizzled proprietor, but by the time he had dismounted, three or four white men had appeared from nowhere in particular.

"Howdy," said Beaver Smith. "Where you from?"

"White Oaks," Poe had the answer ready. "Been prospecting. I'm on my way to the Canadian."

He dallied at the door while the town's welcoming delegation gathered around him. They were hard citizens. One did not need to look at their revolvers to realize that.

"Which way you coming from?" one demanded.

"White Oaks," he said. "Been prospecting."

He stood among them before the little unpainted bar and drank sparingly of the fervent whisky, while he retailed such tidings from the lower country as were of interest. And when the talk had become a little looser he turned the subject in the direction of his quest.

"Pat Garret was over in White Oaks when I left," he told them, "after the Kid. They say he's been down that way lately."

The talk died at once. He found himself the center of a dumb group. Poe felt their eyes searching him.

"Have another," said he and waited while the tension passed. The conversation picked up again. They talked of the mines. When something like an hour had gone by, he casually mentioned the outlaw's name once more. No one replied. There was no mistaking the suspicion that had arisen among them. And now he began to feel that there was something in the information which George Graham had given him.

He loafed about the store for another hour or so, and when constraint had lifted, he swung into the saddle and rode out by the road that led off toward the Canadian.

He traveled for some miles, far enough to satisfy the most exacting of spies, then started back and made his way to the Rudolph place.

Poe Sees Rudolph

It was afternoon when he dismounted at the ranchhouse. Rudolph met him at the hitching-rack. He was an elderly man and well-to-do, one of the few in the country who were above suspicion of alliance with the outlaw. But the memory of the morning's ordeal in Fort Sumner made Poe go slowly. He sat on the wide porch with his host, and they talked of many things before he mentioned Billy the Kid.

"I've heard that he's in the country around Fort Sumner," Poe said.

It was as if he had thrust a revolver-muzzle into the man's face. Rudolph turned a shade paler. His eyes became furtive.

"Not a sign of him," he declared vehemently. "He ain't here."

Poe showed him Pat Garret's note and put his cards on the table.

"Pat Garret's wrong, and you're wrong," Rudolph told him. "There's nothing in the story. Nothing!" When his visitor rose to depart, his belief was so patent that Poe rode away more convinced than ever that the outlaw was somewhere close by.

It was too late for Poe to return to the camping-place. He struck out for the two rows of cottonwood trees which Pat Garret had mentioned. As he was coming up over a low sandhill to the west, he saw the sheriff and Kip McKinney riding toward him from the east. They met as if it had been timed by clockwork.

Poe recounted the day's events. Garret shook his head.

"We're on a cold trail," he said. "But I know a house where the Kid used to visit. There's a woman lives there he's took a fancy to. If he's in Fort Sumner, he'll mighty likely be at that house."

Lawmen Watch House

They rode down the old abandoned avenue of cottonwoods and left their horses near the other end. In pre-war days the Government had a Navajo school here, and the Indians had planted a peach orchard. The trio stole on foot through the straggling trees that had survived the years to a spot where they could watch the house. The moon rose. They waited here for three hours, but no man came. Sometime near midnight a Mexican slipped out of the door and passed close by their hiding-place.

"I don't like the way that Mexican acted," Garret growled. "If he's seen us, the whole town will know it inside of half an hour. We better pull out."

But Poe thought of those hard-eyed men, looking at him in silence, and of old Rudolph, sweating with fear. He sat there thinking for some moments.

"There's Pete Maxwell," he proposed. "Say we go and see him."

Pete Maxwell was the richest man in this end of the Pecos valley. He and Garret were close friends.

"If the Kid's been around Fort Sumner," Poe persisted, "he'll have heard of it. We may as well cover all the ground as long as we're here."

So as a last resort, and more because they did not like to leave without doing everything that could be done than for any other reason, they went to Pete Maxwell's house.

In the old days of the military post it had been officers' headquarters, a large two-story adobe fronting the open space that had once been a parade-ground. A paling-fence surrounded it. There was a wide veranda on all sides. It stood silent in the moonlight as the three men slipped up toward it. When they had passed through the gate, Garret pointed to the nearest door.

"That's Pete's room," he told them. "I'll go in and have a talk with him. You fellows wait out here."

Garret Pays a Visit

After the Mexican fashion the rooms all opened on the veranda. The door to which the sheriff had pointed was the first one, close to the front. It was ajar, for the night was warm. Garret entered without knocking; his tall form was swallowed by the inner darkness. Poe leaned against the paling-fence. McKinney dropped on one knee, tucking that foot under him cowboy fashion, and began to roll a cigarette. Both had laid aside their Winchesters. They felt able to relax a vigilance that had kept their hands on their weapons ever since the beginning of the evening. Pete Maxwell's place was above suspicion.

And because of that very fact the man whom they were hunting had chosen Pete Maxwell's place for his refuge during all these weeks.

Now, while the sheriff slipped into the darkened room and the other two took their places by the fence to wait, Billy the Kid lay on his blankets in a little adobe cabin in the rear of the house listening to the Mexican who had passed the trio in the old Navajo peach orchard. The whispered tidings of strangers in Fort Sumner aroused him from sleep to catlike quickness. While he harkened he was drawing on his clothes; he buckled his belt, slipped the revolver in its holster, picked up his Winchester, and hurried out unshod to learn more of the strangers. Maxwell could tell him. He came straight to the sheepman's room.

John W. Poe looked up and saw him approaching in the moonlight, a slight

figure, bent forward with haste, almost running. He did not dream it was the outlaw, whom he had never seen. One would as soon expect to meet Billy the Kid in Lincoln as in Pete Maxwell's yard.

The shadow of the house fell on the pair beside the fence. Billy the Kid almost stumbled on Kip McKinney, who was just finishing rolling his cigarette. His rifle was in his right hand; he wore his six-shooter—it was a double-action forty-one Colt's, a weapon unique among the gunmen of the border.

"Quién es?" he asked. In English it is: Who are you?

"That's all right," Poe said quietly. "No one's going to hurt you." He had a dim idea it might be one of Pete Maxwell's sheepherders.

The Kid Fails to Shoot

Billy the Kid backed away. In all his career—and especially since the close of the Lincoln County war, when he had become an outlaw—he had been overquick to kill. Shoot first and ask questions afterward, was the rule in that country, and he had always gone the rule one better. But tonight he forsook his deadly custom. Probably it was for the same reason that kept Poe from suspecting his identity: this was Pete Maxwell's place. He could not well afford to slay a man here unless he was sure that his victim was an enemy.

So he backed away, and as he retreated across the veranda:

"Quién es?" he asked again. He repeated the question sharply as he entered the room. The last that Poe saw of him was when he stood his rifle on the threshold.

Pat Garret was sitting on Pete Maxwell's bed. The room was black dark. The figure of the outlaw flashed past the pool of moonlight at the door and was swallowed in the gloom. It reached the foot of the bed.

"Pete, who are those fellows?" the desperado asked. Pat Garret's hand dropped to his revolver-butt. He knew the voice. He started to pull the gun and it stuck. It was—so he told John W. Poe afterward—a long and lonely moment that followed.

Billy the Kid heard the movement and whirled toward the room's outer wall.

"Quién es?" he demanded. He had shifted his revolver to his right hand, he had drawn a butcher-knife in his left, when Garret's weapon came free and the sheriff fired twice.

Outside the house Poe and McKinney heard the two shots and the thump of the outlaw's body as it struck the floor. There was a groan.

Garret came forth upon the porch.

"That's the Kid," he said quietly, "and I think I got him."

"It couldn't be." Poe shook his head. "You've got the wrong man, Pat."

Find Desperado's Body

While he was speaking Pete Maxwell burst forth upon them. Poe threw down on him with his Winchester, but the sheriff struck up the weapon's barrel.

"Don't shoot Pete Maxwell," he cried. They turned to the panic-stricken sheepman. He bowed his head.

"It was the Kid," he told them. At Garret's order he brought a lighted lamp, and they found the body lying on the floor with the knife and the revolver in the dead hands. Garret's first bullet had found his heart; the second one had struck the wall as he fell. . . .

It was nearly a year before they tried the Cattle King of Tularosa. Charley Siringo rode over from the Panhandle and was stricken with smallpox while he was traveling across country from the Pecos. But men were accustomed to harder things than smallpox in those days, and the wagon-boss wrapped his face in a silk handkerchief to keep the spots from showing. Other than that

(Concluded on page 187)

A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

THE two-bit book bargains we cut out of the herd for you in our last issue were so well received that we've rounded up a few more of the critters to add to the brand. They're all good looking books and the selection is the cream of western fiction by the best authors in the field.

FREE GRASS by Ernest Haycox

The opening of the northern ranges brought a wild race for new land and across a thousand miles of wilderness charged Major Bob Gillette's outfit of men, cattle and horses. Betrayed by a crooked ramrod, San Saba, Major Gillette is first sold out then killed. His son, young Tom Gillette, taking up the vengeance trail against the murderous San Saba finds himself fighting for his life against a deadly band of night-riders out for conquest and murder. This is top writing by one of the masters of the Western story.

GUARDIANS OF THE DESERT by Tom Gill

Nick Sari came down upon the water-starved border ranches with a plan for a big irrigation project that sounded like the answer to a prayer. Only Dick and Bruce Lowell had even a suspicion that Sari's scheme might be a fake and that he was planning to clean out the ranchers who trusted him. While Dick was away, checking on Sari, Bruce was bushwhacked. The news brought Dick home to strap on his guns and lead the disillusioned Verde ranchers in a gun blazing fight against Sari's hired killers. Lots of action in this one.

GUNSMOKE TRAIL by William MacLeod Raine

Guarding the payroll bound for oil town Petrolia, young Percy Moran was jumped by a fast-shooting gang and robbed, though they lost one man in the fight. Burning mad, and determined to prove that a man named Percy could be tough, Moran went on to Petrolia, struck the outlaws' trail and began a hunt which he vowed could only end in capture of the bandits or his own death. A tale of the days when the West was wild, by an old master of the game.

SECRET VALLEY by Jackson Gregory

Home after years of prospecting, Ross Haverill finds Secret Valley under the thumb of his bitter enemy, Tom Storm. Haverill was not the kind of man who took bullying from anyone and when he found his friend, Bob Roberts, killed by Storm's orders and his own ranch threatened, he had reason enough to swear a gun vendetta with an old enemy. War came to Secret Valley and every man became his own judge and jury, backed by the .45 in his holster. You won't lay this one down until you're finished.

WINTER RANGE by Alan LeMay

Trouble had come to the Wolf Bench country. The cattle market was sinking and ranchers, touchy, nervous, beset by troubles, were bristling at each other like strange dogs. A range war was in the making. Then John Mason shot himself.

Kentucky Jones came home for the inquest. In the crowd he saw a girl whose loveliness he well remembered—Jody Ragland. She looked white and faint; she moved toward him, thrust something into his hand. Kentucky looked at it. It was a bullet. He knew what she meant to tell him. John Mason had been murdered and this was the bullet that had done it! A superbly written novel that never falters in its headlong press of action.

When the tall cowboy ambled into Chola, the townsfolk never suspected he was a bit of walking dynamite!

The DUDE from NOWHERE

A fist like a block of iron hit Butch

By BRADFORD SCOTT

THE Sunrise Limited was not scheduled to stop at Chola, but it did. Rocking about on his seatbox, old Tom Baker, the engineer, herded his roaring train toward the Tinto Hills, at the base of which reposed the cowtown of Chola, mere local stop on the C & P mainline. Far ahead he could see the dark mouth of the cut that opened out to the west a scant quarter of a mile from the straggle of dobes, shacks and false fronts that was Chola. The Sunrise was a little late and making up time.

Her exhaust chuckling, her side rods flashing a blur in the sunlight, a squirrel tail of steam drifting back from her quivering safety valve, the great locomotive roared on. Baker hooked the reverse bar up another notch, widened the throttle a trifle. A musical clang and rattle sounded in the cab as Jenkins, the fireman, plied his shovel. The long stream of yellow coaches rocked and rumbled.

Meanwhile, things were happening at Chola. A siding paralleled the main line, and on that siding reposed a string of freight cars.

Somebody had slipped up with that string of cars. The brakes were not properly set, nor was the derailer. Maybe it was the vibration set up by the approaching limited, maybe the

devil poked a finger up under a rail and tilted it a mite. Anyhow, the peaceful looking string began to move. Slowly the wheels turned over, then a little faster as the pull of gravity on the slight grade got in its work. The string ambled down the siding, split the switch and rolled gaily out onto the main line.

The fifth car didn't make it. At the split switch, the flanges climbed the rail. The car, butted by those behind, slewed around sideways and turned over with a bang. Another followed it, and still another. Several more were derailed and swung around to further block the main line. There was a pile-up to make a wreck train foreman curse the day he was born.

And what had happened was nothing to what was to come. The Sunrise roared into the cut, the flanges screaming on the curve. With a clattering of echoes, she boomed out the far end. Jenkins, hopping back onto his seatbox after putting in a fire, let out a screech of warning.

Tom Baker slammed the throttle shut, twisted his automatic airbrake handle and "wiped the gauge"! One hundred and twenty pounds of air pressure per square inch ground the brake shoes against the wheels. The great locomotive bucked and reeled like a living thing. Couplers clang-jangled and banged. The fourteen coaches of the Sunrise gave the engine a mighty nudge. The screaming drivers, locked tight, slid along the rails as if they were greased. Baker threw the reverse bar over and jerked the throttle wide open. The thunder of the exhaust and the howl of the spinning drive wheels added their quota to the general pandemonium.

With brakes, throttle and reverse bar, the old engineer fought to save his train, but to no avail. The awesome pile-up across the main line seemed to fairly race to meet the Sunrise.

"Leave her!" yelled Baker, sliding from his seatbox. "We're goin' to hit!"

An instant later he and Jenkins "jined the bird gang"! They were turning cartwheels down the embankment when the Sunrise hit the pile-up with a crash that sent coyotes two miles away scuttling for cover.

Fortunately the embankment was soft and not overly steep. Baker and Jenkins lost considerable hide and were sorta stove up, but no bones were broken and when they hit bottom they still had breath enough to swear.

The passengers in the coaches were well jolted and suffered some bruises, but there was nothing to hold an inquest over. The locomotive turned over gracefully on its side, after knocking two more freight cars off their wheels. The express car left the tracks and slewed around until it was teetering over the edge of the embankment like a see-saw.

The express messenger disentangled himself from a baby carriage that had squatted across his neck and peered out the window. He looked straight down into some twenty feet of nothing at all. The view from the window was somewhat disconcerting, so he went away from there.

IN CHOLA, folks came pouring out of shacks, dobes and saloons to see who was raisin' heck and shovin' a chunk under a corner. When they learned that nobody was seriously hurt, the excitement took on somewhat of a festive air. Heading the parade were a number of cowhands from neighborhood spreads, who had been having a payday celebration in town, chiefly in the Ace-Full saloon run by Hamhock Higgins.

For a while the wreck was the chief attraction in Chola. Passengers began dropping from the Pullmans to look over the wild and woolly cowtown. From what they could see of it and its inhabitants, Chola didn't appear so out-of-the-world.

But for the celebratin' cowhands, the lure of red-eye and poker soon became stronger than the interest centered on the wreck. By twos and threes they drifted back to the Ace-Full. Among the last to leave the pile-up were old John Masters, owner of the big Cloudy Moon ranch, and his foreman, lank Jim Sanborn. They paused in front of the

Ace-Full while Masters relighted a very frayed cigar. Suddenly he removed the cigar and stood with his mouth open, staring toward the wreck.

"Jim," he said, "do you see what I see?"

Sanborn shook his head mournfully.

"Nope," he replied, "I don't. It just ain't so."

A man was picking his way along the track in their direction, a tall man with wide shoulders and a lean waist. But it was not his build, of which there was nothing to complain, that attracted the attention and for the moment paralyzed the faculties of the two elderly cowmen. It was the way he was dressed.

Starting at the top, he wore an enormously wide-brimmed "J.B." of spotless white. His shirt, of purest silk, was a glittering golden-yellow. About his throat was looped a flaming scarlet neckerchief also of costly silk. His skin-tight pants, spotless white as the hat, were tucked into boots of vivid yellow, elaborately tooled and stitched. About his waist he wore a tooled leather cartridge belt, to which was suspended a stiff leather holster also stamped and tooled and stitched. From the fancy sheath protruded the gleaming pearl handle of a gun. And the handle was silver mounted. Altogether, he looked something like a rainbow that had busted loose from its tether.

Mouths open, eyes bulging a trifle, the two cowmen stood and stared as the radiant stranger drew near. Old John at last found his voice.

"G-good g-gosh!" he stuttered. "What a dude!"

The stranger evidently possessed keen hearing. He undoubtedly heard what Masters said, for he turned his face in his direction. However, he did not appear offended. The corners of his rather wide mouth quirked upward. Little wrinkles crinkled the corners of his eyes. Masters, who had a habit of seeing everything, absently noted that the eyes were a very pale gray in color, rather long, set beneath level black brows and fringed with thick black lashes.

With that semblance of a grin, the stranger passed Masters and Sanborn and pushed his way through the swinging doors of the Ace-Full. Looking slightly dazed, Masters and Sanborn followed him.

As the stranger entered the Ace-Full, a dead silence blanketed the big room, a silence of amazement. Even the waxen-faced, impassive dealers at the card tables looked somewhat flabbergasted. The nearest barkeep continued to pour whisky into a glass that was already filled to the brim. Hamhock Higgins even forgot to take pay for a drink.

Apparently oblivious to the sensation he had created, the tall stranger strode to the bar and laid down a coin.

"Beer," he ordered briefly.

Habit asserting itself, the dazed bartender filled the order. The stranger unconcernedly sipped his glass with apparent relish.

RECOVERED somewhat from their initial amazement, the cowboys began to chuckle and make remarks. With innate courtesy and the West's consideration for other folks' feelings, they mostly kept their voices down. An exception was Big Butch Burns who owned the Window Sash. Butch was not a very nice person sober. Drunk, he was the sort a rattlesnake refrained from biting, for reasons of personal safety, and Butch was well on the way to getting drunk. His hands, a number of whom were with him, were the kind of jiggers who usually work for a boss like Butch.

Butch slapped his thigh with a huge paw, guffawed loudly, said things about mail-order cowpunchers. The stranger continued quietly to sip his beer.

This ignoring of his best efforts irritated Butch. An ugly glitter birthed in his dark eyes. Finally he swaggered across the room, laid a not very gentle hand on the stranger's shoulder.

"Have a drink with me, feller?" he invited.

"Much obliged," said the stranger. "I'll take beer."

"I'm drinkin' whisky," Butch said, with meaning.

"Prefer beer," said the stranger, apparently a man of few words.

"A man who drinks with me drinks what I'm drinkin'," growled Butch, his heavy face beginning to flush with a murderous glow.

"Prefer beer."

Butch writhed his thick lips up over his stubby, tobacco-stained teeth.

"Yuh're takin' whisky," he barked, and dashed his half-filled glass into the stranger's face.

Things happened. A fist like a block of iron hit Butch squarely in the mouth. Butch hit the floor. He came off it spitting blood and curses, and rushed, his thick arms flailing. The stranger stepped aside, and hit Butch again. Butch hit the floor.

Butch rose a trifle heavily. He lurched, lowered his head, and rushed again. And again he hit the floor. This time he took a table with him. He lay for an instant, gulping and mumbling. Then he flopped over on his hands and knees. His right hand streaked to his belt.

Men yelled wildly and dived to get out of line. The stranger bounded forward. One of the fancy boots ground Butch's wrist against the floor boards. The other kicked the gun from his hand and clear across the room. The stranger stepped back.

Big Butch Burns yelled with pain. His riders surged forward; but old John Masters stepped in front of the stranger.

"That'll be enough, boys," Masters said. "It was a fair, stand-up, man-to-man wring till Big Butch started fangin'."

Old John's word packed considerable weight in the section. Lank Jim Sanborn's gun hand also packed considerable weight. And lank Jim was standing beside his boss, one eyebrow cocked a little higher than the other, which was a sign those who knew lank Jim did not disregard. Also, it was plain that general public opinion in the Ace-Full was back of Masters.

THE Window Sash hands, growling among themselves, helped their boss to his feet and led him out, rumbling curses and threats. The stranger turned back to the bar and called for another beer. He was sipping it in an unconcerned fashion when Masters touched him on the arm.

"Son," said the ranch owner, "take a mite of good advice from an old man. When yuh finish your beer, head back to your train and stay there till she pulls out. That's a salty hombre yuh downed in that wring.

"He's over to the doctor's office now, gettin' patched up, but after he's got on the outside of a few more jolts of snake juice, he'll be comin' back here, lookin' for trouble. He ain't gonna take it over kind, that goin' over yuh give him, pertickler if yuh happened to bust up his wrist till he can't take part in the contests tomorrow."

The stranger looked more interested than alarmed.

"Contests?" he repeated. "What sort of contests?"

"Why—ropin', bulldoggin', hawgtie-in', ridin'; mostly ridin'. That's the pertickler big event."

"Open contest?"

"Why," Masters replied, slightly puzzled, "I reckon it is. Ain't never been nobody barred. It's a sort of loco rodeo we hold every year. Not reg'lation, like the big ones at Cheyenne, and other places, but we get considerable action."

"Any chance for me to enter the riding contests?"

Masters stared at him. His glance ran over the fancy mail order clothes.

"Why, son," he said, "all the best riders in Luna county are signed up for the shindig, and we got the worst bunch of outlaws and other bad horses corralled for the doin's we've ever had. It'll be tough goin', son, no place for amachoors."

"I can ride a little," stated the stranger.

Old John turned helplessly to lank Jim Sanborn.

"What do yuh think, Jim?" he asked. "Reckon I sort of have the say. Reckon

I oughta take a chance on lettin' this young feller get his neck busted, or gettin' gunned by Butch Burns?"

Sanborn shrugged his sinewy shoulders.

"Oh, what the heck!" he growled. "If the dude wants to take a chance, why let him. It's his lookout."

"Okay," said Masters, "I'll sign yuh up, son, if nothin' else will do yuh. What name shall I enter yuh under?"

The stranger let his gray eyes rest on Sanborn's face a moment. Old John absently noted that in the back of those pale eyes was something that reminded him of granite walls up-rearing under a gray sky.

"I reckon," the stranger said quietly, "that the name this gent just tacked onto me will do."

"Yuh mean, dude?" Masters asked.

The other nodded.

"Okay," said Masters, the suspicion of a smile twitching at his mouth. "I'll enter yuh as The Dude!"

"Much obliged," said The Dude. "Can I get a place here to stay overnight? Tired. Don't sleep well on trains."

"I'll fix yuh up with a room over the saloon," said Masters.

"Much obliged," The Dude repeated, and walked from the saloon.

Masters shook his head pessimistically and turned to Sanborn.

"I don't like it, Jim," he said in worried tones. "Butch Burns is goin' to get drunk and make trouble."

"Notion the young feller can take care of himself," grunted Sanborn. "He sure did a little while ago."

"Uh-huh, with fists," Masters agreed. "But if it comes to shootin', it's liable to be a hoss of another color. He wouldn't have a chance with Butch. Even if he was as fast on the draw as Buckskin Frank Leslie or Wyatt Earp, he couldn't pull that slick-handled iron outa that stiff holster quick enough to shade Burns. Nobody could."

Sanborn shrugged. "His roundup, I reckon," he grunted.

THE Dude reappeared a little later, lugging a battered suitcase which he had retrieved from the wrecked train. He had paused a moment to talk with the Pullman conductor of his coach, and had slipped the official a bill, which was received with a word of thanks and a promise to carry out some chore requested of him by The Dude.

"I don't like it, Jim," Masters repeated as they watched The Dude mount the stairs to his room. "Butch Burns is goin' to show up here in a little while. I'm scairt there'll be trouble."

Butch Burns did show up before long, in a black and ugly mood, although the doctor had assured him that the injury to his wrist was not serious enough to bar him from the following day's contests.

But before Butch showed at the Ace-Full, the wreck train from the west roared into Chola. With the big hooks came the sheriff of the county and two deputies, just in case, for it was well known that the Sunrise often packed a hefty passel of dinero in the express car safe.

John Masters heaved a sigh of relief. Sheriff Kilgore was a cold proposition, and his two deputies wore a like brand. Not even Butch Burns and his Window Sash hellions would be likely to kick up a shindig with Wade Kilgore on the job. Kilgore was sort of impatient with cowhands in a sod pawin' mood.

Before morning the Sunrise, back on all fours again, boomed out of Chola, the wreck train following. The sheriff and his deputies also departed. But before they left, Butch Burns, with the morrow's contests in mind, had sobered up and gone to bed. He was still in a vengeful frame of mind, however, muttering threats and curses through his cut and swollen lips.

All evening and throughout the night, folks from outlying spreads and pueblos had been pouring into Chola for the rodeo. There was a big crowd present when the contests started. By early afternoon the lesser events had been disposed of, and the riding contests began.

When The Dude appeared for the first

chore assigned him, such a howl of greeting arose as was seldom accorded to anyone other than a prime favorite and accepted winner.

"Good gosh!" whooped an old cowhand, "he hurts my eyes to look at him. Sure hope he doesn't bust his neck first off. Watchin' that jigger will give me a cheap drunk. I feel dizzy already."

The Dude didn't bust his neck on the first try. He managed to stay on his horse the required time, although he showed no particular riding ability. In fact, he seemed to barely make it.

It was the same with his next try, and the next. But as the contests continued, with progressively tougher trials, and The Dude still managed to get by, experienced oldtimers drew their brows together thoughtfully.

Good riders got pitched or were disqualified for one reason or another, but The Dude always managed to just make it. Finally, to the amazement of the crowd, they realized that but two contestants remained in the running for first prize—Butch Burns and The Dude!

And now came the event for which everybody had been waiting all day. The announcer stepped forth, cupped his hands and bellowed, "Butch Burns on Widow Maker!"

The crowd let out a roar. Widow Maker was the meanest, orneriest, snake-bloodedest cayuse that ever busted a neck. In fact, he'd never been ridden to a stand-still, and he had more than one killing to his credit.

Widow Maker was a rangy, steel-muscled, iron-mouthed blue moros a full seventeen hands high. He had a deceptively meek look about him that had fooled experienced busters. With hanging head, he stood impassive while the rig was put on him. He always did. It was no chore at all to saddle Widow Maker, but bucking him, well, that was something else.

Confident, arrogant, Butch Burns swaggered out. He sneered at the quiet blue horse, forked him as if he were the best gentled cowpony of his spread.

Widow Maker got busy, and showed the crowd tricks that weren't in the book. Weaving, pinioning, sunfishing, fence-wormin', high-polin', swappin' ends, walkin' beamin', pile drivin', double shufflin', were all regulation stuff to the Widow Maker. And he did some things for which appropriate descriptive phrases had not yet been coined.

BUT Butch Burns rode him. Whooping, jeering, cursing, Butch dared the Widow Maker to do his damnedest, and came back asking for more. Butch Burns was the sort of rider who throwed the steel freely. He raked the moros with his spurs from shoulders to rump, one of the highest accomplishments of the bronc-buster. He bicycled, scratching with first one foot and then the other. He curried him out. He fanned him, slapping him resoundingly with his hat. He rode straight up, one hand on the reins, the other high in the air. And all the while he sat close to the plaster, ridin' it out.

"Butch is considerable of a horned toad, but he sets a bad hoss as easy as a fly on a mule's ear," John Masters observed to The Dude, who stood beside him watching the contest, or, rather, watching the Widow Maker. Apparently he didn't see Butch Burns at all. His entire attention was centered on the blue horse.

Suddenly things happened. The Widow Maker came down solidly on all fours, bunched his hoofs, and at the same time seemed to bunch his long body. Like a released spring he straightened out, shot into the air and swapped ends, all in one bewildering flicker of motion. And away went Butch Burns!

Butch didn't have time to look for a soft spot to land on. Despairingly he clawed leather to save himself as he left the hull, and almost pulled the saddle horn out by the roots, to no avail. He lost his hold and went flying through the air, his legs kicking around like a migrating bullfrog in full flight. Butch didn't bust anything when he finally landed, but all his bolts and hinges were loosened.

The Dude let out a startled exclama-

tion. "So that's how he does it!" he ejaculated.

"Happens like that every time!" whooped Masters. "The blue hellion lets a jigger ride him just so long, then sends him chawin' gravel! What did yuh say about, 'That's how he does it?' "

"Didn't yuh see it?" The Dude exclaimed excitedly. "He bunches his body up together, sort of like foldin' an accordion shut. That swells out his barrel bigger'n blazes, and spreads the rider's thighs. Then he straightens out like a streak of goose grease, his barrel shrinks, and if the rider doesn't catch on, his grip is loose. Up in the air goes the horse, and a sight higher goes the rider."

Before Masters could reply, the announcer was bellowing, "And now, gents, on the hoss what ain't ever been rode, the gent who ain't been throwed —so far today. The Dude on Corpse Maker, Widow Maker's twin and buckin' mate—but worse!"

In a dead silence, The Dude forked Corpse Maker, his black head held high, his yellow shirt shimmering in the sunlight. Corpse Maker proceeded to emulate Widow Maker's performance, with a few variations thrown in for good measure. And The Dude rode him, easily, gracefully, a very part of the horse himself. And then without warning came that queer bunching of the long body and the bewildering straightening out. High in the air went Corpse Maker, swappin' ends. But when he came down, The Dude, swayed far out to one side, was still there.

Corpse Maker proceeded to go completely loco. He did things he didn't himself know he could do. Again he tried his ace-in-the-hole. But again The Dude was there with a straight flush when Corpse Maker hoped to rake in the pot. A third time he tried it, and The Dude was still in the hull.

CORPSE MAKER stopped dead still, with hanging head. He snorted, jingled the bridle iron with a petulant shake of his head. The Dude tickled him with his spurs. Corpse Maker craned his neck around and nipped playfully at The Dude's leg. The Dude ran his hand down Corpse Maker's lean head and rubbed his nose. Corpse Maker nuzzled his fingers with his lips, thrust his velvety nose into The Dude's palm and blew softly.

The Dude, chuckling, his pale eyes sunny, unforked and looped the bridle over his arm. The crowd went plumb loco.

John Masters came hurrying forward, his face shining.

"Yuh did it, son!" he whooped. "Yuh had the lowdown! Yuh rode him to a standstill! First prize money is yours!"

"Divide it among the boys," The Dude replied. "All I want is this horse."

"He's yours," Masters instantly agreed. "I'll box him and send him to wherever yuh say. You plumb sure earned him."

The crowd about The Dude and Masters suddenly fell silent. A man was pushing to the front, shouldering all out of his way. It was Butch Burns, his bruised face black with rage, his eyes burning with an insane hatred. He fronted The Dude, and spoke, his voice thick with passion.

"Feller," he said, "this section ain't big enough to hold both of us. There's a train pullin' out of here at six o'clock. Yuh're takin' that train, or else!"

The Dude gazed at him, the granite walls up in the backs of his eyes. For a long moment he gazed, then turned on his heel and walked away. Butch Burns, his face working, and his lowering cowhands, the whole Window Sash outfit watched him go. Then, in a compact body, they moved off in the direction of the railroad station.

Masters, his face worried, shook his grizzled head.

"Trouble," he growled. "And we can't stop it without riskin' a general shootin'. Why in blazes couldn't Kilgore have stayed here till this was over. I tried to get him to, but he said he'd got word of a wideloopin' down along the Border and had to go. Mebbe that young feller will be sensible, though, and take the six o'clock, like Butch told

him to."

Lank Sanborn thoughtfully rasped his long chin with a gnarled forefinger.

"John," he observed, "we saw some prime horse tamin' this afternoon. I've a notion we're due to see some prime man tamin' about six o'clock."

Chola was tense with anticipation as the hour hand of the clock swung downward toward the bottom of the dial. When it had almost reached it and the minute hand was climbing to the top, just about the whole town was grouped near the railroad station. There was a murmur of excitement as the distant whistle of the six o'clock local sounded.

Butch Burns stood in the center of the platform, grim and determined. His riders were grouped ominously a little to one side. Masters, Sanborn, and some others stood still farther to the side, where they would be out of line if lead really did begin to fly. Intently, all eyes watched the approaching train. So intently that they did not note a man crossing the street with long easy strides, from the direction of the Ace-Full saloon.

Into the station boomed the local. Its engine panting, it paused for a moment while some express was unloaded. There were no passengers getting off at Chola. And no passengers got on at Chola!

The express car door banged shut. The conductor shouted a perfunctory and needless all aboard! The exhaust thundered, the wheels turned over. Picking up speed quickly, the local rumbled west. Butch Burns swung his gaze from the departing train with a growling curse. He glared toward the Ace-Full saloon, where The Dude had been observed mounting the stairs to his room some time before.

SUDDENLY Butch stiffened. A man had stepped onto the platform from the street and was walking steadily in his direction. Old John Masters noticed him at the same instant, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

It was The Dude, and yet, it was not The Dude. Not as they had been accustomed to see him during the past thirty-six hours, at any rate. Gone were the white hat, the yellow shirt, the white pants of velvet-corduroy. Gone, too, were the fancy boots and the scarlet neckerchief.

The man coming along the platform had The Dude's tall, sinewy figure, his pale eyes, his rather wide, firm-lipped mouth. But this man wore a faded blue shirt open at the throat, well worn overalls stuffed into scuffed half-boots of softly tanned leather, and a weather-stained gray J.B. cuffed over one eye.

Gone, too, was the fancy, stitched and stamped cartridge belt and the stiff, tooled scabbard.

Replacing them were double cartridge belts that showed signs of much use, and carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters. And protruding from those holsters, low down and flaring out from The Dude's lean hips, were not pearl and silver, but the plain black butts of heavy guns.

The Dude halted. His pale eyes looked the astounded Butch Burns up and down. His mouth was a hard line across his face. His voice rang out, harsh, metallic, "Okay, Burns, yuh're called! Fill your hand!"

There was no mistaking the meaning. Butch Burns' face flamed scarlet. His hand streaked to his belt.

Burns drew fast, almighty fast, but before his gun could clear leather, The Dude's right hand also flickered down and up. One of the long Colts boomed sullenly.

Butch Burns went backward as if he had inadvertently stepped in front of the Sunrise Flyer. He hit the station platform and lay moaning and retching, pawing at his blood spouting shoulder.

The Dude's gaze swung around to center on the Window Sash riders. His smoke wisping gun was clamped against his hip. His left hand, the fingers spread clawlike, hovered over the black butt of his second gun. He spoke, the same steely note in his voice. "Okay! Anybody else aim to step up?"

But the Window Sash hands didn't aim to. Their eyes wavered, they shuf-

fled with their feet, kept their hands very, very still. Finally somebody mumbled a few words. In a group they moved cautiously to their fallen boss, heaved him up and headed for the doctor's office. The Dude watched them a moment, holstered his gun and strode across the street to the Ace-Full. He entered, approached the bar.

"Whisky," he ordered. "Fill 'em up for anybody who cares to have a drink with me."

A moment later, old John Masters sidled up alongside him.

"Son," said Masters, "would yuh mind tellin' me who you are, and where you hail from?"

The Dude turned, his eyes were merry. He grinned, showing a line of very white teeth.

"Nope," he chuckled, "I don't mind. I would have told yuh anytime, if you'd asked me. My name's Ed Wetherell. I'm foreman of the Drag Nine ranch over in Cochise county, Arizona. It's a good little spread. My dad owns it."

"But—but," stuttered Masters, "how come yuh got off the westbound flyer in them fancy clothes? No reg'lation cowhand ever wore duds like them."

Ed Wetherell laughed out loud, his pale eyes dancing.

"Well," he chuckled, tilting his glass, "it was this way. Last spring I was doin' fancy ridin' at the rodeo in Cheyenne. In the crowd was a gent who was a scout for a big circus. After the contests, he looked me up and asked me to sign with his show for the season. The pay he offered for the season was about ten times the dinero a cowhand earns for the same time.

"I figgered I could use that dinero, so I signed up for the chore. About the clothes; in that sort of ridin' chore, yuh hafta dress the part. I know they look funny, but the circus customers like 'em, and after all, they do the payin' and have a right to ask for what they like. That's how I come to have 'em. How I come to be wearin' 'em yesterday is like this."

He paused to roll a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand. Masters, Sanborn, and the others who were grouped around listening, watched him in expectant silence.

"Well," he continued, "the circus is on its way to winter quarters and I was headin' back home. Night before last, when I was tryin' to get some sleep in that Pullman berth, and not havin' much luck, I got a notion for some fun. I'd already wired the boys at the spread I'd arrive on the Sunrise, and I knew they'd ride over to Benson to meet the train. I figgered I'd put on them fancy duds just to hear the boys howl when I got off. Sort of a joke, you know.

"That's what I did when I got up yesterday mornin'. When the Sunrise piled up here, I took a notion for a glass of beer and headed to the saloon for it. I'd plumb forgot all about the duds; been used to wearin' 'em steady all summer, yuh know. The first I thought of 'em, was when I heard you, Masters, remark on 'em. Of course I knew they'd sort of set the boys off when I went in for a drink, but I didn't figger anybody would mind and I didn't care if they joked about 'em. Hadn't figgered on a gent like Burns bein' around."

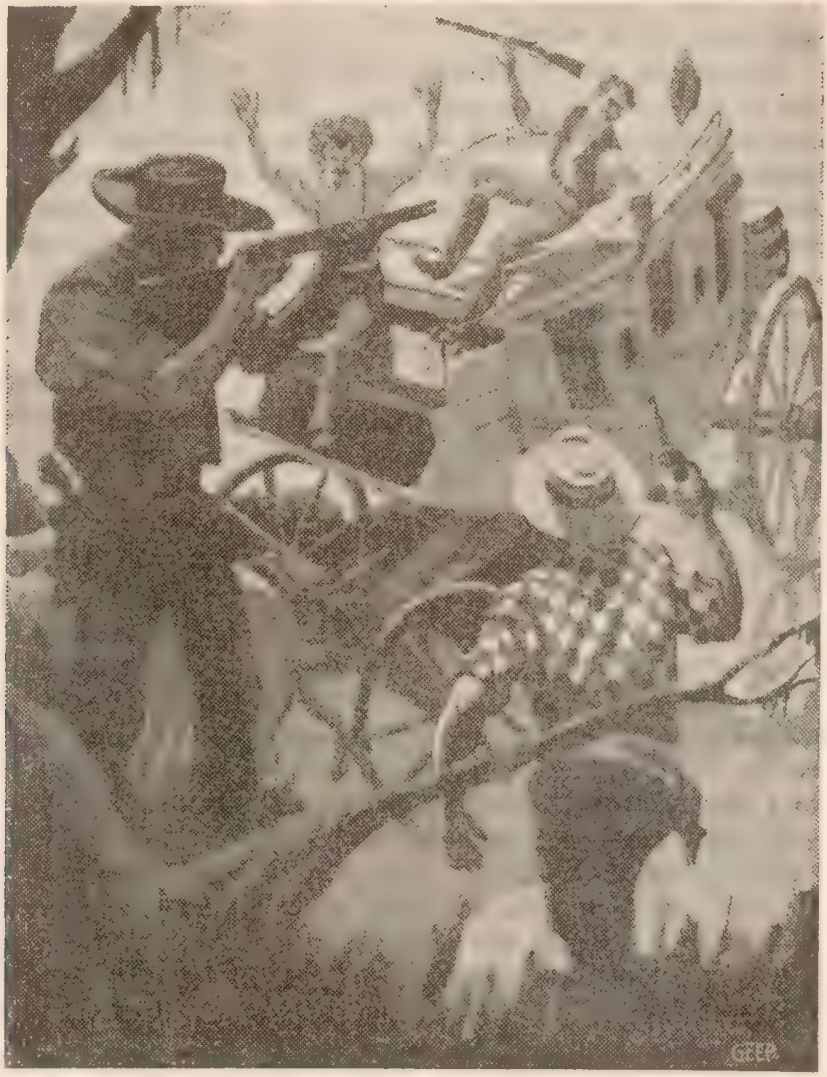
"And I reckon Butch didn't figger on a gent like you bein' inside them duds," chuckled Masters. "Well, it all turned out okay, which was more'n I'd hoped for a while back, and I reckon Butch got a lesson that'll hold him for a spell. And now I know where to send that blue horse. When do yuh figger to pull out for home, son?"

"There's another train stops here at ten-fifteen tonight, I heard," Wetherell replied. "Reckon I'll take that. I paid the Pullman conductor to tell the boys when the Sunrise stopped at Benson that I wouldn't be along for a day or so. But they'll be wonderin' about me, so I reckon I'd better trail my rope."

They watched him wave good-by from the rear platform of the ten-fifteen when the train pulled out. Masters turned to his foreman.

"Jim," he said, reflectively, "for the sake of the gen'ral well bein' and good reputation of this section, I hope we ain't visited soon by any more dudes!"

HANDS UP!



by HARRY VAN DEMARK

The colorful true story of pioneer adventure when danger followed stage-coach trails!

THE Clifton and Lordsburg stage had just reached the bottom of the gulch before the last hill north of the Gila River, and was slowing up for a breather before essaying the big rise.

"Drop them lines!" a voice roared.

A masked figure appeared at the bridle of the near lead horse, and another, on the bank above, loomed threateningly behind a leveled Winchester rifle. The blue Arizona moonlight made the road agents look like giants.

Charley Michelson, a small boy sitting beside the driver could feel his heart thump in time with the heaving of the stage horses. Nothing happened for a moment, and he was able to realize just how frightened he was.

The driver sat looking straight into the muzzle of the hillside ruffian's Winchester. The lines were dropped at the command, and slowly slipped over the dashboard. Nobody seemed to know just what to do next.

The silence was suddenly broken by the sleepy voice of a woman inside the coach, demanding to know what was the matter. Nobody answered her. The man behind the rifle gruffly asked how many passengers were in the stage.

"Nobody but old Pancho Cuervo's woman," answered the driver. The road agent probably would know who she was.

The other road agent left the horse's bridle and unhitched the traces from the stage, just to make sure that some belated impulse of heroism did not inspire the driver to make a dash. Then he went around to the stage door and peered in.

He ordered the Spanish woman to hand over her money, which she did, calling down upon his head a most picturesque and elaborate series of disasters. Her diatribe had all the swing of a medieval excommunication—but she had to give up her purse.

"Now, George, let's have the box!" ordered the man with the rifle.

With his feet—his hands were still in the air—the driver shuffled the Wells Fargo box out of the boot and with it the mailbag. The robbers paid no attention to the boy.

Just before smashing the box one of them took the precaution of extracting the shells from the big six-shooter that hung at the driver's hip. When he had rifled the box and bag, they turned into the brush.

The driver grumblingly climbed down, hitched up his horses and drove into Clifton. The flow of invective from the old woman inside continued all the way.

To the driver this was an ordinary, and an unusually peaceful incident. In town he reported the robbery without any particular show of indignation, and went off to put up his horses.

"Take a Road Agent's Advice, Kid"

Two days later the sheriff picked up the robbers in the brush and brought them in to old Judge Sias' blacksmith shop. That unconventional jurist immediately started forging leg-irons for the prisoners. One of the robbers was holding up his leg to facilitate the work on the anvil when he recognized young Michelson, the boy who had been sitting beside the driver at the time of the hold-up.

"Kid," he said, "there's nothin' in it. There ain't much in punchin' cows and yuh get only two and a quarter a day in adobe money at the smelters since the Mexes learned how to do that job. But take it from me the poorest business on earth is holdin' up stages. This makes three times we stopped old Pommery's outfit, and all three times didn't get us fifty dollars. And now we're off to do time in Yuma. Young feller, don't you ever go stickin' up no stage, or Sias here will get yuh for shore."

"That's good medicine he's givin' yuh," remarked Deputy Sheriff Bill Sumlet, who would take the two prisoners to Solomonville, the county seat.

As a "peaceful" robbery this incident was typical of road agent activities back on the Western frontier in the Seventies and Eighties. These robbers were new in that section of the country or they would have known that the money for the payroll of the copper miners, which they were after, never arrived by stage. It was brought up from the railroad hidden in bales of quilts, or packed in boxes of codfish, and entrusted to ox-team freighters—who knew nothing about it—with the one idea in mind of thwarting robbers.

A Great Institution

Just why a boy was on the box with the driver that day instead of the usual

shotgun messenger is not recorded, for few stages in those days started out for a run without those hard-boiled individuals on hand to protect driver and passengers in case of trouble.

The Wells Fargo shotgun messenger was a great institution. Armed with sawed-off weapons, each barrel loaded with thirteen buckshot, these shotgun men practically drove all but the most daring stage robbers off the road. Hundreds of amateurs and bunglers were discouraged—or killed—before they gave up.

But the more desperate of the road agent fraternity accepted the challenge of the shotgun guards, and the assassination of the guard was usually the first move in a hold-up. The more adept of the bandits contrived to get the drop on the messenger, and his sawed-off shotgun was as useless as a putty blower when he was looking into the muzzle of another man's shooting hardware.

With the exception of the men who exploited the gold stages, the robbers who preyed on overland traffic were most iniquitous. Their profits were often enormous. One stage, held up a little east of Salt Lake City in the early fifties, yielded $30,000 in diamonds, the stock of a jeweler who was migrating to San Francisco to open up a business.

The records show few court trials of stage robbers during the days of the Overland. The country was wild and desolate, and the difficulties of bringing back prisoners to courts were many. So captured bandits were generally "killed while attempting to escape." Members of robber bands realized that surrender meant death, so fought it out to a finish when overtaken by lawmen.

Masquerading As Indians

Thus there are innumerable battlefields between the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast which figure in no written history. But old trail drivers could tell how at this water-hole or that ford the "Sunset Gang," or the "Red River Thieves," or the "Elkos" were killed to a man in the days when the prairies belonged to the buffalo.

One band of robbers along the northern route used to take in the stages in the guise of Indians—and they were horrifyingly thorough in their masquerade. Stained, befeathered and mounted on Indian mustangs, they would descend upon a coach, killing the driver, the passenger and even the horses. They scalped the dead and burned the stages.

Because of their depredations, military punitive expeditions attacked Indian camps all up and down the Northwestern country. This was, of course, a lamentable injustice, yet in a way excusable and not so surprising since in those days almost every Sioux, Brulé, Ute or Bannock in the Northwest was on the warpath whenever he found a white man with his back toward him.

When this evil masquerading crew was finally rounded up, their rendezvous was found packed with Indian war gear and scalps. But real Indians were never stage robbers in the usually accepted sense of the term. For them, it was too complex a means of getting money. If a stage came along when an Indian was decked out in his war stripes, he would shoot the driver and passengers, but his first purpose was not robbery.

Nearly all of this overland road crime was carried on by gangs who worked methodically. One or two men kept the driver, guard and passengers covered, while another went through their pockets before departing with the Wells Fargo strong-box and the mailsacks.

Desperate Character

The lone highwayman, who became such a prominent figure in the West, was a later development. Sometimes he was the last survivor of a band which dwindled due to the vigilance of shotgun messengers and the growing census of State prisons.

Milton Sharp was one notorious robber who belonged to this class. He first achieved notoriety in Nevada in the late Seventies, when the Bodie mines were shipping out gold bars every week. Sharp and a partner took in on an average a stage a month and got rich. For besides the bullion they got there were pick-ups from the passengers and the express boxes.

Once the two were lucky enough to catch the stage which carried money from San Francisco to pay off the miners. Sharp got $13,000 in bills and hid the money under a boulder. He afterwards said that somebody had found the money. Anyway the robber was robbed.

In 1879 Sharp performed an exploit that set his name high upon the roll of desperate characters. With his partner he halted the stage between Aurora and Pizen Switch. By that time his depredations had become so bold and frequent that the express company had brought some trained badmen hunters into Nevada to attend to his case, and one of them was on the Aurora stage that day.

As soon as the stage was halted, the shotgun guard ducked and fired at the man who stood at the horses' heads. He got his man, while the bullet from Sharp's gun went high. The shotgun messenger tried for Sharp, but he had fled.

They gathered up the dead robber, pulled the gunnysack from his head, packed him on the stage with the trunks and went on their way.

Two miles further up the road the guard found himself looking squarely into the end of Milton Sharp's gun. There was no chance this time for the guard. Taken completely unaware, he gave up his sawed-off shotgun. Sharp smashed it over a rock, then proceeded leisurely and systematically to rob the coach.

When his partner was killed, Sharp had taken a short cut over the hill to where he could intercept the stage again.

The guard, exhilarated by his victory, never dreamed of a second holdup, as Sharp was clever enough to guess.

A Boss Takes Over

Nobody knows how many stages this man Sharp looted. He would never tell, so he is probably accredited with more than his share on the books of the old Wells Fargo detective department.

The Preston line of stages in Montana suffered many robberies which were attributed to him. It got to be such a regular thing that the express company threatened to take away its business from the line. Preston cursed his men for cowards and offered rewards, but the drivers came in steadily with the same story of an adroit road agent who appeared seemingly from nowhere and got the drop before they could even think of their guns.

Preston became desperate and took the driver's seat himself, a six-shooter on each hip and a shotgun between his knees. When the familiar shout of, "Throw up your hands!" rang out, he dropped the lines and reached for his shotgun.

He went through the rest of his life without any hands. The robber's charge of buckshot carried them both away at the wrists.

It was the system and workmanlike finish of Sharp's achievements that identified their perpetrator. After losing his partner on the Pizen Switch and Aurora road, he always worked alone. His rule was to leave nobody in the stage while he was operating. He first took away the weapons of the guard and driver and then attended to the passengers.

As each man stepped from the stage Sharp passed his hand over him for weapons. Then he lined up the whole coach company like soldiers by the road-

side, their backs to him, their hands in the air. He passed along the line, turning their pockets inside out. When all the watches and pocketbooks were in the dust, Sharp would give his next order:

"Forward—march!"

Distinguished Guest

The only improvement on this system, according to the records, was the inspiration of an Arizona highwayman, who used to make his victims stand holding the driver's long whip extended above their heads, with the warning ringing in their ears that he would shoot at the first sag in the whip.

This fellow's star achievement was holding up, single-handed, a coach on which were nine soldiers of the regular Army.

He did not get much out of it, but it was worthwhile as an artistic piece of effrontery.

Sharp, however, got along well with his own system. But he was finally run to earth and locked up in the Aurora jail with a fifteen-pound Oregon boot on his leg, and shackles besides. Even with this handicap he broke jail, but the desert was too much for him. He was starved out and finally surrendered.

Sharp proved to be the "show" prisoner at the Carson penitentiary. He had a dignified pride in his eminence and was introduced to all the distinguished people who visited the Nevada State Prison.

THE GOODNIGHT TRAIL

By WILLIAM CARTER

MORE than any other pioneer of the West, Charles Goodnight left his mark upon the country and the cattle industry which is so much a part of it. After the Civil War, when the ranges of Texas were teeming with cattle that had no market, trail herds drove north to Abilene and Dodge City to meet the buyers for the meat-hungry East. There were trails going north, such as the Chisholm trail and to many people the "Goodnight Trail" was considered one of these.

The Goodnight Trail however, was something entirely different. It headed northwest rather than north and it opened up an entirely new country.

Goodnight's vision was always a step ahead of his contemporaries. With the northern trails jammed with longhorns, Goodnight thought of a new territory altogether. The U. S. government had Indian reservations in New Mexico for which beef was needed to feed the Indians.

Why not drive into New Mexico and sell the cattle there?

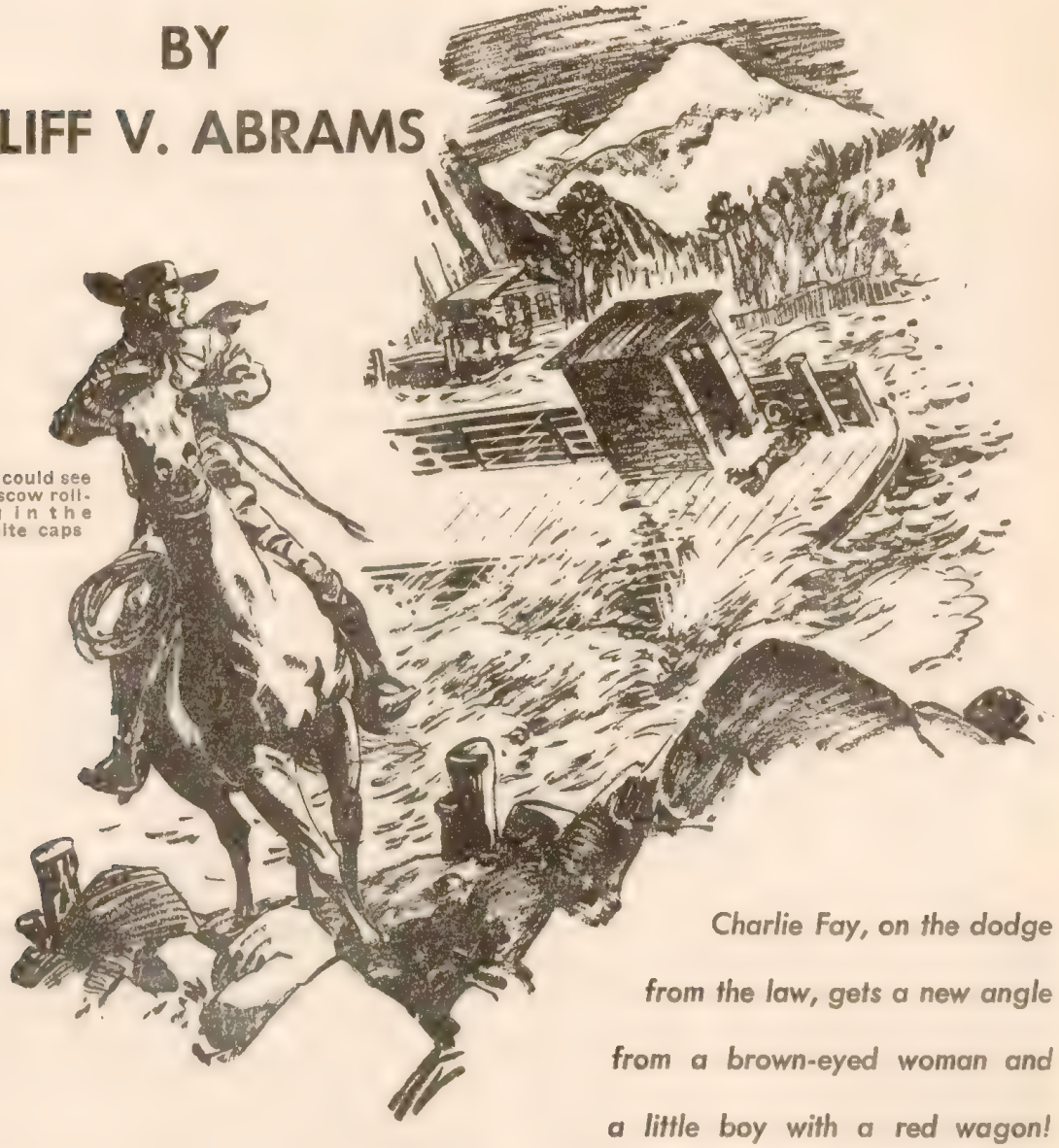
So, in June, 1886, Goodnight and his partner, Oliver Loving pointed a herd of 2,000 cattle in the general direction of Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and started. Their way led across the Llano Estacado, the Staked Plain of Texas, a wild and semi-arid country where the Comanche was king and water was scarce. They fought it out mile by mile through suffocating summer heat, tortured by dust and flies and thirst and with the ever present threat of sudden Indian attacks. But two months later they brought their herd into Fort Sumner to find a ready welcome from the Indian agent.

Meat was sixteen cents a pound (butchers please note) and since Goodnight and Loving had neither the facilities nor desire to do their own slaughtering, they sold the cattle on the hoof for eight cents a pound.

It was Goodnight who later began to import Durhams and Herefords from England to improve the longhorn breed and so again changed the entire face of the meat raising industry.

I'M A-FREIGHTIN' WEST

BY CLIFF V. ABRAMS



Fay could see the scow rolling in the white caps

Charlie Fay, on the dodge from the law, gets a new angle from a brown-eyed woman and a little boy with a red wagon!

CHARLIE FAY reached the Missouri River in a high wind, his face gray with weariness and his hat pulled low against flying sand. He swung his sweat-streaked bay into the nearest plum thicket and stepped stiffly from saddle. He realized that it was risky to be pulling up, but a man had to stop sometime; so did a horse.

Downriver, a ferry cable sagged like a rusty thread, above the tumbling water. Fay meant to cross by that ferry —and fast. When a man has a half-mile of current and quicksand between himself and the Law, he's fairly safe.

Fay turned and eyed the bluffs, the twisted, gashed land he had just left. They were empty, but he knew that a

posse soon would come, holding to the ridges, where they could command a good view of the river.

Fay's gaze swung back to the river. He saw the white-caps breaking high, spreading fine spray. Hard to handle a sweep in that stuff, especially on a clumsy scow, sliding on a cable. Besides, many ferrymen objected to crossing in a high wind.

Fay smiled coldly, squatted on his heels and slid a long-barreled Remington from its leather. Like many other men in the country, Fay preferred this side-arm to the much lauded Colt. He thumbed open its gate, examined loads, and shoved it back. That Remington could change the mind of the most obstinate ferryman.

If things really went wrong, Fay could handle the boat himself, for he had ridden rough water before. He shrugged, went into saddle and pushed out.

Riding warily, Fay struck a road, only rods from the ferry. To the right, on a ledge, was the ferryman's house. Its rear snuggled against the chalk rock, and the front was protected by two young cottonwoods. A white curtain fluttered at a window, but there was no other sign of life.

Then, almost at his horse's feet, Fay saw the kid. Tow-headed, the tail of his hickory shirt flapping, he was laboring to pull a toy wagon filled with an assortment of junk, out of a sandy hollow. The kid had brown eyes and freckles, and looked to be about five years old.

HE EYED Fay shyly, then grinned abruptly. "I'm a-freightin'," he announced, and again tugged at the wagon. "I'm a-freightin' west."

"Shore thing!" Fay grinned back. "Yore daddy around?"

"No," the kid answered. "He went across the river. He ain't been back. Not for long, long, time."

Fay looked at him wonderingly. "Hasn't, eh? Then who runs the boat?" Fay discounted.

"We do," the boy said.

Before Fay could inquire who "we" meant, the house door opened and a woman stepped out.

"Lorry," she called, "dinner is—"

She spied Fay, where he was partly concealed by a clump of bushes. She stiffened for a moment, then walked up to him fast.

The wind whipped the house dress about her. She was a small woman with a peaked face. Her level brown eyes examined him questioningly.

"You wanted something, mister?"

Fay hesitated, shrugged, then said harshly, "I want across. I—"

He stopped. From the cabin door the odor of cooked food had followed the woman.

Coffee and fried bacon! It almost made him reel. It had been days since food, except a few berries, and a lone jackrabbit that had fallen to his six-shooter, had entered his mouth. He fought down his hunger savagely.

"I want across, now!" he repeated.

The woman's eyes touched his bay, swung back over him in one measuring glance. She saw deep-set gray eyes, a gaunt face sprouting brown bristles, a long, hard body, and broad shoulders. Her hand closed on the bridle reins above his.

"I have some feed over in the bunk for your horse," she said. "You go to the house and start eating. It's all ready."

"But, ma'am!" Fay looked at her in amazement.

"You both need it," she said. "Now go!"

Fay's hand clinched tight on the reins, but she shook her head impatiently.

"We're alone." Her eyes were steady.

Fay moved toward the house.

Behind him, the little tin wagon rattled. Fay didn't notice, nor did he take

time to sit down when he got inside the house. He snatched up a plate, scooped on bacon and potatoes, grabbed a pair of biscuits, and stepped to the window where he could watch.

He would be able to see a posse before it got too close. The window gave an unobstructed view of the bottomland.

He took time to pour himself a cup of coffee. As he lifted it to his mouth, he glanced at the child, who stood just inside the door, his eyes wide.

"So yuh're freightin'?" Fay said. The wagon was battered and rusty. Its wheels tipped at all angles. "Rolling stock's a mite on the worn side. Could use some fixin'." Fay spoke with a full mouth.

"I was to get a new wagon," the boy said. "All red and shiny, with real bows and top!"

"But yuh didn't get it yet? That it?"

The child shook his head sadly. "No-o. Mamma says, 'Sometime. Mebbe when we get more money.'" The child rattled on, but Fay wasn't listening.

His mind had leaped back. Money! That was what had put him on the dodge. Money borrowed to build up a herd. Money due with cattle prices at bedrock, and an unscrupulous banker, who had refused to carry him over, but had demanded an immediate payment.

Fay's anger had leaped to white heat. Five years of his own hard toil had gone into that herd, and he was finished. They had been alone in the bank at the time and Fay had struck hard. He had heard the crack of bone, had seen a limp man on the floor. There had been bundles of greenbacks lying handy. He had jammed them into his pockets and raced out.

His get-away had been dead easy. But he had kept telling himself that at a decent price his cattle would bring twice what he had taken. But almost immediately, he had regretted what he had done. And now regrets were useless. The cards were down.

"Ever see that wagon, mister?" The boy's chatter dug into Fay. "It's in a big window uptown. Did yuh ever see it? Huh? Did yuh ever?"

"Mebbe I did, son, but it's been so long ago, I—I've forgotten about it."

"You ever have one?"

"Come to think of it, I never did. Not a little one."

"Gee! You and me didn't get nothin', did we?"

Fay grinned at the child's earnestness. "Sort of looks that way, don't it?"

The tow head nodded soberly. "Mamma says, 'When things get better,'" he sighed. "I shore wish Dad'd get back. Some time I'm goin' to take my wagon and really cross the river west, too."

"Now I reckon that'd be fun," Fay told him.

"Can't I go today?"

Before Fay could answer, the boy's mother walked in.

"Hush, Lorry," she told him gently. "You're bothering the man. Run along out and play."

Fay poured himself another cup of coffee. As he drank it, he glanced now and then at the woman. She had seated herself at the table, and was nervously folding and unfolding her hands. They were small, had once been delicate and tapered, but now wind and rough work had chapped and reddened them. Her shoulders sagged, as though she were tired. Her dress, though of good material, had been patched and mended again and again. Her shoes wouldn't last until winter.

A movement on the bottom drew Fay's attention. It was Kinkade, the sheriff. His posse had fanned out, was riding fast. Fay dropped his unfinished meal.

"I got to go now," he said swiftly.

"All you have to do is handle the sweep," she told him. "The cable holds it into the current."

Fay dug some bills from his pocket, and dropped them on the table. She

shoved them back. "You'll need them worse than I," she said.

There was no time to argue. Fay raced to his horse and jerked it aboard.

The ferry was a crude affair, with a decked-over compartment at one end. He was casting off when the woman ran to the bank. "C-cut that cable soon as you're across," she panted, shoving an ax into his hands. "There's a skiff below here! They'd take it and fetch the ferry back, when the wind goes down."

"Why are you doing this for me," he demanded.

"Perhaps I don't—perhaps I can't blame you."

"But, ma'am, that scow—just driftin' in the wind."

"No matter," she interrupted impatiently. "It will land somewhere."

Fay hesitated only a second longer, then grasped the sweep and poled through the slick mud that lined the shore. He smiled grimly as the sweep sank feet deep at each lunge. It would take a ferry all right, to cross a horse.

Generally the Missouri bed is firm and hard under water, unless it is filling in. Then sometimes for miles along that edge the river eddies whirl in and slowly settle tons of quaking mud, which in time rise above the surface.

FAY hit the deep water and waves with a rush. They were tall all right. In the trough there wasn't a thing to be seen. Just sky and sliding water, with crests that blew like suds. Take a mighty good marksman to pick off anything in that stuff.

Kinkade tried his luck, as Fay lifted on the next crest. Kneeling on the east bank, the sheriff's Winchester rapped out four shots. Other rifles cracked seconds later. But Fay only laughed. It was like shooting at a half visible cork, dancing crazily in the spray.

On the west bank Fay stepped out. His horse's hoofs clattered on the chalkrock. Good landing here. Fay caught up the ax and swung at the cable. It parted, and he watched the ferry swing out. Kinkade would be the rest of the day—maybe all day tomorrow—getting it in running order again even when he caught up with it.

Fay mounted and rode away from the river. At the top of the bank he turned to wave a mocking farewell. His hand froze shoulder high.

Below him, in the freed boat, a child's figure had crawled from the forward compartment. The boy who had said, "some time I'm goin' to take my wagon and really cross the river west, too." Fay swore, whirled his horse and then touched it with his spurs.

He didn't notice the tangled wild creepers just below the bank until his horse crashed into them. Heavy as a lariat, they caught the bay below the knees and threw him, hard. Fay was flung from saddle. He twisted, as he fell, landed on head and shoulders.

Waves of the river dashing spray over him brought Fay to. What had happened returned with a rush. He tried to stand, but his back hurt as though someone had smashed a club between his shoulders. His eyes swung over the river.

He couldn't have been out long. The scow was still there, the south wind holding it against the current. Fay could see a small, scared face as the scow rolled in the whitecaps. The child was clinging to the oar lock with both hands.

The scow was crosswise in the trough. It would rise, teeter on the crest, slide down, take a cap over the gunnel and again rise, each time more sluggishly than the last. It must be swung soon, quartered into the wind or, filling as it was, it would flounder, or even roll like a log.

Fay's horse had got to his feet and was cropping at the creeper that had thrown him. Fay managed to reach a stirrup, and crawl up, but the bay refused the water. Time and time again,

Fay's spurs dug, but it was always the same. As soon as his forefeet struck the water, the bay snorted and swung back.

Fay fought the stubborn animal until the pain in his shoulder had him almost screaming. A driftwood chunk bobbed past. Fay slid down and worked out to it. The water was breast deep before he was close enough to throw an arm over it. He got his feet off the bottom and started paddling with his free hand.

It was slow work, swimming with a chunk. Maddeningly slow. Fay was still twenty feet away when the scow started under.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Jump!"

Water drove the words back into his throat, but with a lunge, he managed to grasp the small striped shirt, tumbling in the whitecaps. Turning, he shoved for the chalk rocks. . . .

THE sun, pulling heat and wind with it, was dropping fast behind the western hills when Fay again moved along the chalk rock. He rose from the shelter of a cut, stepped swiftly to the river's edge and placed the kid in the arms of the woman scrambling over the bow of a skiff. "He's all right, ma'am," Fay assured. "All right. Just sleepin'."

His hand dipped, raised, and the long-barreled Remington swung on the man who had dropped oars and lunged to his feet in the grounded boat.

"All right, Kinkade. Set down and pick up them oars again. Just because I couldn't leave a kid all alone by this cussed river ain't no sign I'm haulin' in now." He stepped swiftly backward, fumbling for the reins of his horse, still feeding among the creepers. "I'm ridin' on now, and don't you so much as blink till I'm gone!"

Kinkade remained motionless, but a tight, half-mocking smile was on his sharp face. It drove a surge of uneasiness along Fay's spine. Something was not quite right. He found his reins, lifted to saddle and settled himself.

"All right, feller, drop back!" a voice snapped.

Startled, Fay swung his head and looked straight into a Winchester on the bluffs behind him. His own gun swung, then Kinkade's voice stopped him cold.

"Drop it!" the sheriff snarled. "Or we'll burn yuh out of that saddle!"

Slowly Fay's fingers opened and let the Remington fall.

"All right. But how in thunder did anyone get behind me?"

"I got word over yesterday," gloated the lawman. "Hollered it over. Some fellers were gatherin' cattle in the west bluffs. They'd been on the look-out for you. One was ridin' the ridge above here when the woman and I was rowin' over. Now climb into this boat!"

Fay shrugged and stepped down. He'd had a chance, could have been far back in the brakes before the way had been closed. He glanced at the woman. She had taken her seat in the stern. Her head was bowed, her shoulders shaking. The boy was held tight against her.

Fay stooped suddenly and picked up the oars.

"Reckon yuh'll be wantin' me to do the rowin' eh, Sheriff?" He grinned.

Kinkade grunted and nodded. . . .

That was all that Fay got from Kinkade until two days later, when the sheriff suddenly came to the cell door, unlocked and shoved it wide.

"All right, Fay, get out of here!" he growled. "Beat it—go on!" he added, as Fay stared. "We couldn't get a conviction out of any cussed jury in this country, nohow. Not after that woman'd had her say."

"What yuh mean by that?"

"That woman from the ferry's been here. And she's made it a point to let the wife of every cuss in the country know what happened at the river. They rounded up their men and worked on 'em till yuh . . . Shucks, yuh're more a danged hero than a cussed bank robber.

So get out of my sight!"

Fay got, and three hours later was again at the river, carefully lifting down a red wagon he had balanced over the saddle-horn all the way from town.

"Here, kid!" he called. "It was still up there in the window. I reckoned yore dad hadn't got back or had time to get it, so I fetched it on down."

"Gee!" the boy cried excitedly, as he pulled the wagon back and forth in the sand. "Gee! A regular freight outfit, all right! A real one!"

Fay turned and looked at the woman.

"I caused him to lose the one he had," he said, "and . . . Well, ma'am, this is the only way I know to say I'm sorry. Mighty sorry. Tell yore husband that I'll make it right for his boat, some day. I'll ride over when he gets back."

The woman's hand lifted to her mouth. Her suddenly tear-laden whisper barely reached Fay.

"My husband isn't coming back. It wasn't this river he crossed."

Fay understood. "I'm sorry," he said. "When did it happen?"

"Over a year ago. Things went bad. Our ferry didn't earn us enough to eat. My husband went to the bank for a small loan, but they turned him down. He took a job with a freight outfit west of the river. There was an accident. I couldn't tell my boy that. That's why I've always told him that his dad was just over the river. I've always felt harshly toward that bank, ever since. That's why I wanted you to get away. I'd heard they were after you."

She paused, her eyes startled, for Fay had caught her slim fingers hard.

"Mebbe things'll turn out all right." The words tumbled from him softly. "And will be all right from now on. All right for you, for me and for the Kid. Think mebbe they could?"

She flushed, but didn't try to draw her hand away.

"Maybe they will," she whispered.

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EMPIRE OF BEEF

By JOHN BLACK

OLD-TIMERS who bemoan the passing of the days when the West was big, might have a look at the modern King ranch—biggest of them all.

Strung along the Gulf coast of Texas below Corpus Christi are the four divisions of the King ranch: Santa Gertrudis, Laureles, Encino and Norias. There is also the Sauz Ranch, whose title is not yet cleared. The total acreage is 976,000 acres, which tops by a wide margin the Union's smallest state, Rhode Island, with a modest 777,000 acres.

This kingdom, whose operations are on a scale that would have daunted the most autocratic cattle baron of old, is dominated by one man, Bob Kleeberg, who has built it up, produced a new breed of cattle and so improved its grasslands, that it is the only large ranch which does not need to grain feed its cows before marketing.

More than 400 cowboys (mostly Mexican vaqueros) round up and ship something like 20,000 cattle a year, roughly 20,000,000 pounds of beef, which will gross close to $4,000,000.

The ranch is fenced by 1500 miles of wire, enough to reach from New York to Houston, Texas.

There are 2,900 specially bred quarter horses for the vaqueros to ride and 100 cars and trucks for the longer distances to be covered on the ranch. Cars and trucks are equipped with compasses and maps to insure them against being lost.

There are 75 drilled artesian wells and 225 windmills to bring the water to the surface for the widespread cattle. Huge concrete troughs provide drinking places.

The traditional whitefaces—Herefords—did not stand up well under southern Texas' tropical sun, nor did the black English Shorthorn. Despite misgivings of the old timers, Bob Kleeberg began breeding experiments with Brahmans and Shorthorns. The result was a cross known as the Santa Gertrudis breed, which despite its dark color thrives on grass and heat, grows bigger and heavier than other breeds on the same diet. Kleeberg also developed a strain of yellow-beard grass which seems to suit these cattle perfectly.

The King Ranch was founded by Captain Richard King, a steamboat captain on the Rio Grande who made his money freighting supplies to the Confederate forces. He bought land along Santa Gertrudis Creek, started the empire and died in 1885, leaving his widow 500,000 acres and debts of exactly a dollar an acre.

Then a young lawyer, Robert Kleeberg, was called in to manage the ranch. He cleared off the gigantic $500,000 debt, licked the summer drought by being the first to drill wells, imported Herefords and Shorthorns and put the ranch on its feet. Then he married the youngest of the King daughters, Alice.

In 1916 the Norias division stood off a siege by Pancho Villa in which Villa lost eight men and departed without glory or loot. And through the years the ranch continued to fight rustlers, drought and disease and grow ever stronger.

The scientific ranching and breeding which the King ranch developed seemed to be able to triumph over all obstacles.

It is in the present regime, however, that scientific ranching and breeding has really merged into big business. With $1,000,000 a year profit as a goal, the King ranch has nothing to worry about except hoof and mouth disease, inflationary prices, various political straws in the wind and the annual calf crop.

THE STORY OF THE WEST'S BIGGEST RANCH!

THE LAW-BRINGERS

(Concluded from page 164)

he did not let the disease bother him, and he was on hand to give his evidence when the case was called. So too were the Nesbeths. The jury gave their verdict: Guilty.

The judge let Pat Coghlin off with a fine of two hundred and fifty dollars.

Within a few months two Mexicans waylaid the Nesbeths and murdered them at the Point of the White Sands. To the officers the pair stated that the Cattle King of Tularosa had paid them one thousand dollars for the deed. But he was never tried.

Poe Succeeds Garret

For some years such men as John W. Poe, Pat Garret, and others continued to carry on the task which the warriors of the Canadian had begun. When Garret's term as sheriff ended, the people elected Poe to the office. By the time he retired the courts were really beginning to make their presence felt in the land.

So the law came across the river, and only a few gray-haired men who had lived there in the wild days when every one made his own rules of action and enforced them with forty-five or Winchester remember the old saying of the early 'Eighties:

"There is no law beyond the Pecos."

Answers to Questions on Page 147

1. Wild Bill Hickok was killed in 1876, in Deadwood, South Dakota, by a tinhorn gambler named Jack McCall.

2. The Chisholm Trail got its name from the route used by one John Chisholm, a cattle king of the Old Southwest.

3. A horse named Comanche was the only survivor of the battle on the American side.

4. The "Colossus in Buckskin" was Sam Houston, hero of the Texas struggle for independence.

5. The Forty-niners, en route to the gold fields of California, went by way of Death Valley—and many of them left their bones there.

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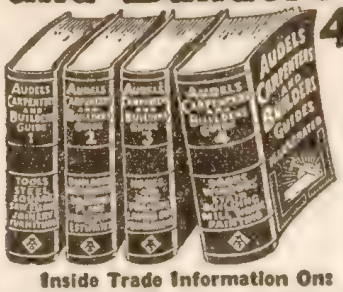

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Ride 'Em Cowboy!

The First Texas Rodeo

By LEW MARTIN

THE first rodeo officially recorded in Texas took place at the town of Canadian in the year 1888.

For some time it had been customary for cowboys, at the conclusion of a roundup, to indulge in a little sport by staging impromptu riding and roping contests. A roundup was a big affair in Texas, with several ranches participating. Each night, over the supper fires, it was natural for the cowboys of each ranch to brag about the crack riders and ropers on their spreads. Such talk led easily to bets and the bets, of course, could only be resolved by proof, which led to the contests.

When this had been going on for some years, a really serious bet came up regarding the roping abilities of a cowboy named J. Ellison Carroll and a cowboy named Albert Phillips. The cowhands of the Laurel Leaf ranch then conceived the idea of making this a public exhibition.

Word spread quickly and the turnout was astounding. By horse, by buckboard and dusty buggy, by ox-team and by the newly built Santa Fe railroad they came.

There was no arena, no grandstand, no rodeo rules. It was called a "Cowboy's Reunion" and the events were referred to as a "tournament." A bronc rider rode until the horse quit. There were no hazers to ride in and save him, no referee to signal the end of ten seconds. Man, horse and spectators were all in danger from the bronc's plunging hoofs.

Naturally there were no admission fees, though this came later when some enterprising soul realized the gold mine which the newly born sport promised. But the amount of betting even on that first day was prodigious.

Oh yes, J. Ellison Carroll won the roping contest!

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

the neck, but Ware's answering shot was dead center.

The stranger, being a bit slow, did not get his artillery unlimbered until too late and Ware's second shot drilled his shoulder and tumbled him off his horse. He was sick and scared then, and he talked. Orcutt and Seever had sold them the cows for $200.

Ware rode into Canyon looking for Spade Orcutt and Morry Seever. He found them in the Empire saloon, playing stud. There was a cribbage board lying on a vacant table, a heavy, hard piece of wood, and Ware picked it up as he went by.

"I hope you and Seever have been winning, Orcutt," he said. "For I want two hundred dollars from the pair of you."

Orcutt played dumb. "Why there ain't that kind of money in this game," he blurted. "Just a little straight stud, two-bit limit."

Seever knew his partner wasn't kidding anybody. "What two hundred dollars you talkin' about, Ware?" he asked.

"The two hundred dollars Ute Rhyde paid you and Orcutt for twenty head of—!"

Logan Ware Collects

Seever's chair squealed as he lunged up, stabbing for his guns. Ware threw the cribbage board. The heavy wood opened a big gash just above Seever's left eye and he spilled over his chair

[*Turn page*]

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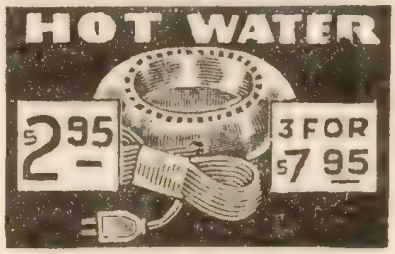

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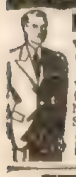

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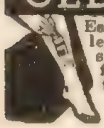

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with a mighty crash.

Whirling, Logan Ware caught Orcutt's half-drawn gun and jerked it from his fingers. "Two hundred dollars, Spade," he said. "The money belongs to Hat, not you and Seever."

He slashed a forearm across the side of Orcutt's bull neck, then nailed him on the jaw with a punch that came from his heels. Spade staggered and Ware hammered him clear around the table and chopped him down.

Then, calmly, he took a hundred dollars from Spade Orcutt and a like sum from Morry Seever.

"A word for all who are interested," Ware said to the hushed audience in the saloon. "Hat is just as tough as it was when Hamp Rudd was alive. If shooting is called for in the future, Hat will be doing its share."

Just how big that share was to be, even Logan Ware didn't guess. But he wasn't bragging, he was making a simple statement. And though the shooting came, the Hat breed was as tough as ever, as Logan Ware proved when the chips were down.

This is a big novel, but you're going to find it hard to put down, once you start it. So, if you have some spading to do in the garden, or some ashes to lug out of the cellar, do it first—that's fair warning!

A Novelet by Tuttle

Just to add to your housekeeping difficulties, we've also grabbed off another story by W. C. Tuttle, long time master of the western story, both humorous and dramatic. We have before now mentioned his Tombstone and Speedy stories, running in EXCITING WESTERN, which are prime examples of robust cowboy humor. But the novelet for next issue's GIANT WESTERN is straight drama, titled THE MARK OF CAIN.

Down the rutted roads to Silver Butte, boom mining town, rode Streak Malone. Streak he was called because of the two-inch streak of pure white hair that split the blackness of the rest

of it. Streak he might have been called because of his legendary swiftness with a six-gun.

No one knew where Streak Malone came from. He never spoke of his past. He was barely thirty years old, but his face bore deep lines and his eyes were the eyes of a man who has looked upon turbulent scenes.

A man hailed Streak Malone as he left the livery stable. "I'm Jim Buskirk, I own the general store here."

"I remember you from Bismark a year ago," said Malone.

"Good. We've been looking for a man like you, Malone."

"What's the deal, friend?"

"Look across the street."

Malone looked and saw a sign on the sheriff's office. It read:

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"The sheriff," said Buskirk, "was an honest man. They shot him down in his office."

"The Vigilantes don't usually kill an innocent man," said Streak.

"There are no Vigilantes," Buskirk told him. "I mean, not honest ones. The sheriff was murdered!"

"I see. Wolves in sheep's clothing."

"Exactly. Will you meet with us?"

"I'll be there."

The Gambling King

Malone's interest was already aroused, but it was even more so when he met Zero Brant, the gambling king of Silver Butte, and Clare Ames, the girl who came out of his past with her story of the mark of Cain!

This is a rousing, fast-moving action story, loaded with excitement like a Colt .45. You'll enjoy it.

Continuing is Ben Frank's hilarious series of "no mistake" stories, detailing the adventures of those two addle-pated lawmen, Boo-Boo Bounce and his deputy Hopewell, who has all but lost hope by now. The new adventure is referred to, in whispers, as BOOTS AND NO MISTAKE and it's a humdinger—and no mistake! [*Turn page*]

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The West was and is, such a vast place, with so many individual dramas being staged simultaneously in many different places, that it is impossible to get a clear-cut all-over picture from these individual case histories. Bechdolt's excellent series of articles should straighten this out for you and move the actors into their proper place on the huge stage. These features will provide a perspective on the West that you never had before and you'll know a heap more about its real history than most folks.

We'd be right proud to hear from you-all if you have any comments, criticism, ideas, or if you just want to talk. Just send a letter or one of Uncle Sam's postcards addressed to The Editor, GIANT WESTERN MAGAZINE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks to all of you who have already written us—we're pleased by your enthusiasm for GIANT WESTERN and hope to quote from some of your swell letters in coming issues.

—THE RAMROD

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SOMBRERO

The Cowboy's Hat

By REX SHERRICK

THE ten-gallon hat of the Westerner is a thing of beauty and a joy forever, but it was not always so. Anyone who has ever examined old-time pictures of Western pioneers and observed some of the shapeless, beat-up and bedraggled contraptions ornamenting the heads of our pioneer ancestors may have felt some wonderment about the romantic tradition surrounding the sombrero.

The truth is, of course, that like every other article of a cowboy's clothing, his hat was chosen less for beauty than for utilitarian value. Despite its eventual appearance, which was due to hard use, the sombrero was made of the very best grade of felt, smooth and soft and usually gray in color.

The high crown, indented with one or more creases, was typical only of the Southwest. In the north, a flat top was customary and a northern cowboy who appeared in a high crown was said to be "chucking the Rio."

The cowboy's hatband was likewise more practical than appeared to the eye, even though often very fancy indeed. The band was adjustable and the hat could be made snugger or looser by changing its length.

The brim was sunshade, umbrella, and campfire-fanner all in one. Slightly curved upwards, the hat served as water dipper and cup. Turned all the way down, it was a good-sized bucket in which water could be carried, thus earning its common nickname of "ten gallon hat."

It served as a pillow at night, a flag to signal with, a catch-all for small objects, even a weapon to throw into the face of a charging steer. In fact its uses were legion.

The price was high, running to forty dollars and over. Many a puncher spent four months' wages on his sombrero and felt it worth the price.

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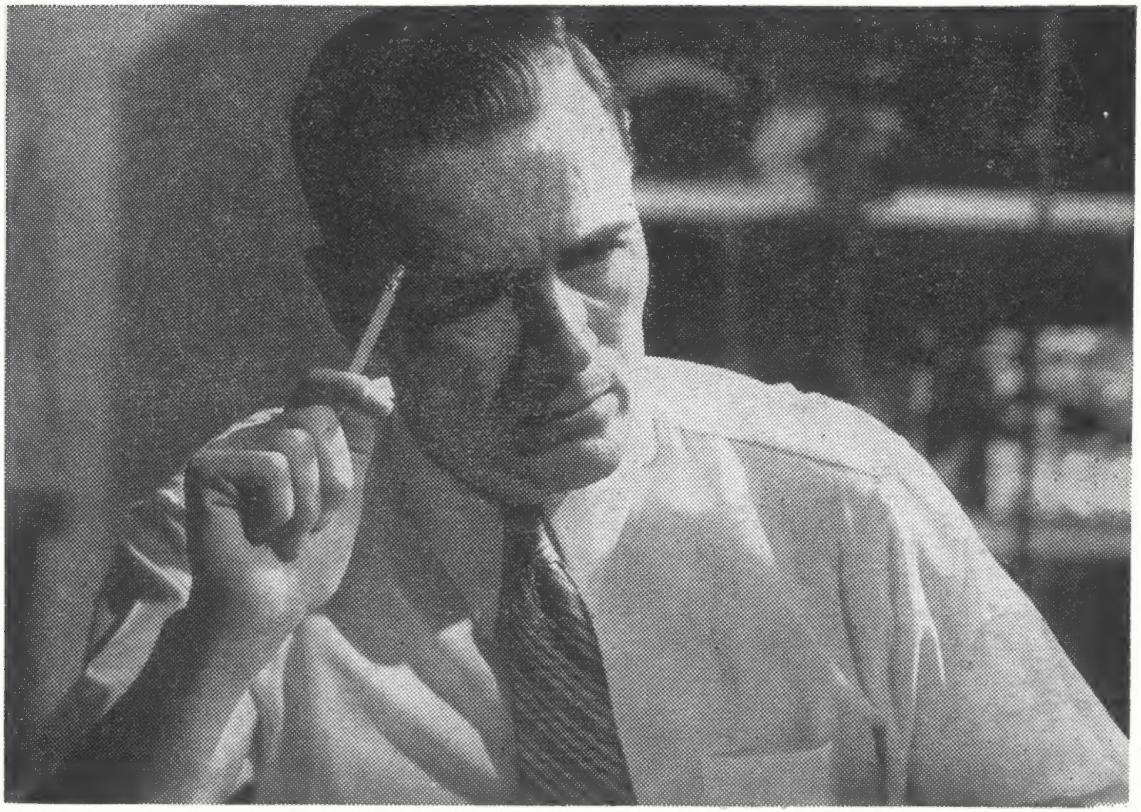

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